



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Someone Is Praying for You
Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

Rev. Mitchell Lewis, a United Methodist Elder and Army Chaplain, recounts an old joke:

A genie told a man, "I'll give you three wishes. Whatever I do for you, however, I must do twice as much for your worst enemy." Now the man thought about it, and about how horrible his worst enemy had been to him, and he finally decided on his three wishes. First, he wished for 1 billion dollars. He received a billion dollars, and his enemy received two billion. Then, he wished for a lavish mansion on a rugged coast. He received his mansion, but his enemy received one twice as large. And finally, he wished to be beaten half to death.

Chaplain Lewis reminds us that "Jesus tells a story about a man who was beaten half to death."¹

I cannot tell you how many sermons I have preached on this parable we know as "The Good Samaritan." Dozens, I am certain. And I have heard dozens more, perhaps hundreds altogether. Without doubt it is the best known and certainly the most referenced parable that Jesus told. It is a clever story, for Jesus told it in such a way as to put the pesky lawyer in his place and to teach the rest of us a valuable lesson—even more than one lesson.

As Luke tells the story, you get the impression that this religious scholar is rather proud of his knowledge of Jewish law. Torah was and remains the guidebook for all faithful Jew and students like this fellow were meticulous in their recounting and following of the law. In fact, they were such sticklers for following the letter of the law that they often lost sight of the spirit of the law, which is largely the point of this story. The lawyer pretends to inquire of Jesus how he might inherit eternal life, but Luke tells us that his true intent was to test Jesus and trap him into saying something which might incite the crowd and turn them against him. Furthermore, he did not really want to know how

¹Mitchell Lewis, "The Good Samaritan," (July 11, 2010); available online at: <https://milewis.wordpress.com/2010/07/11/the-good-samaritan/>.

to gain eternal life. He already knew. He believed that a strict observance of the law would land him in eternity. I suspect he expected a theological debate for which he was well prepared. How surprised he must have been to be told a story that exploded his narrow understanding of faith, of God, and of his neighbor.

It was a provocative story because it raised some sensitive issues about morality and duty. We do not really know why the priest and the Levite passed the wounded man without helping him. It may have been because they had important responsibilities at the temple in Jerusalem and could not be delayed or risk becoming unclean because they touched a corpse. The supposedly wounded man could have been a decoy for a trap. The road from Jericho to Jerusalem was a lonely and dangerous passage. The priest and Levite might have put themselves at great risk to stop and help. Of course there are any number of other reasons why they did not stop. Just think of the various excuses each of us uses when we do not help someone in apparent need. Jesus picked a good story!

Along comes the Samaritan. Thank God for the Samaritan! Certainly that is how the half-dead man felt, but everyone hearing the story would have squirmed. This half-breed cousin of the Jews with odd ideas about worship and God turned out to be the knight in shining armor, the superhero of the day. He stops to help. No doubt he is aware of the risks, but he does not allow his fear to stop him from doing something good. After rendering first aid, he takes the man to the nearest urgent care center, a local inn, pays for his care, and promises to settle up with the innkeeper when he returns that way.

Of the various characters in this story—the lawyer, Jesus, the robbers, the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan—the one person who says nothing and does nothing is the man who is half dead. Although the robbers had left him half dead, he was still half alive. That fact is key to the story. What was he doing? What was he saying? If you were in his predicament, what would you be doing?

I would be praying. It might be a silent prayer, whispered between teeth clenched against the anger and pain. It might be a barely audible prayer, one that whispered for help from the bottom of the ditch. Or it might have been a full throated cry asking God or anybody who could hear to send help. I have been in far less critical dilemmas and believe you me, every time I prayed!

I believe the half-dead man in the ditch prayed for help, begging God to send someone who could take care of him. God did. At least three people saw the man half dead, though only the Samaritan stopped to help. Jesus chose the characters in his story carefully. How shocking that the person who stopped to help the half-dead Jew was a Samaritan. A day earlier, had the Jewish man in the ditch been given three wishes by a genie, the Samaritan would have had two billion dollars and an enormous mansion on the coast, but his days would have been numbered.

When word got around and his friends back home found out what had happened, I am certain that the half-dead man's name would have been mentioned in synagogue on the Sabbath. The next person traveling that route would have stopped by the inn to check on his friend and let him know that everyone in his village was praying for him. That news would have made him feel better. I wonder if the man would admit that he had been praying, too--for the Samaritan.

Every Sunday we read a rather long list of names of people who are ill, and we pray for them. We pray for other people who are grieving or lonely or perplexed about what to do with their lives. As we all know, it means a lot to us when someone tells us they are praying for us. It is comforting and encouraging and supportive. We should pray for one another. We must also be mindful, however, that someone is praying for us, not so much for our well-being, as for theirs. Some people, like the half-dead man on the side of the road, are praying that we will come by, that we will stop, and that we will help.

Author Elizabeth Gilbert tells about a very difficult time in her life when she had lost her marriage, her home, her money, and everything she relied upon. To escape, she went to a very tiny island off in Indonesia where she rented a thatched cottage for \$10 a day. Every day, twice a day, she would walk around this tiny island. There was a small Muslim fishing village there and each day she would notice a woman going about her business. Ms. Gilbert became ill, seriously ill. She was afraid that she had malaria. This woman from the fishing village came and found her. She had noticed that she was not walking by the village every day twice a day and became concerned. She brought food and nursed her back to health.² She was an answer to Ms. Gilbert's prayer.

²Krista Tippett, "Interview with Elizabeth Gilbert: Choosing Curiosity Over Fear," *On Being*, American Public Media (July 7, 2016); available online at: http://www.onbeing.org/program/elizabeth-gilbert-choosing-curiosity-over-fear/transcript/8792#main_content.

People are praying for help. Many of those prayers are for immediate help. Someone needs us to hold open a door while they carry out an armload of groceries or to stop on the side of the road and help with a flat tire. Some people need a meal to get them through the day or a smile to remind them that the world is not totally cruel.

Some of the prayers said for us are occasional prayers that need our help with a ride to the doctor or travel out of town for a chemotherapy treatment. Some people pray for a friend to stop by and visit once in a while or to invite them out to lunch. Some people pray for an offer to sit with an ill spouse so they can get out of the house now and then. Some people need a little free space once in a while, and we can give it to them.

There are people who pray for us to help them with something very specific. This week, as happens every year, we will hear homeowners say that they have prayed for someone to help them fix their home. They will tell the young men and women who work on their houses that they are an answer to prayer . . . and they are! The residents of the homeless shelter and the Bassett Center and My Sister's House will tell you that the churches in this community are an answer to prayer because they had nowhere to go and a shelter was available. Recipients of Meals on Wheels confess that their prayers are answered when a hot meal and a friendly visit are delivered day by day and week by week. There is a young girl in Ethiopia named Bethlehem who writes occasionally to say how grateful she is for this church which sponsors her education. We are an answer to her prayer.

I read yesterday of a woman who had attended the protest in Dallas in order to help make life better for her children. As the horrific attack on police officers erupted, she became a lifesaver for someone else's child. Angie Wisner was looking for a way out of the chaos when a frightened teenage boy asked if he could go with her because he could not find his mother. What JuJuan Taylor did not know is that his mother had been shot in the ankle protecting a younger brother. Two other siblings had made it safely to a secure place. Mrs. Wisner and this young man scurried back and forth, trying to find shelter when another stranger brought them into a safe apartment. JuJuan's cousin was able to come get him later.³ Angie Wisner and the stranger in the apartment were definitely answers to prayer by JuJuan and his mother. Hundreds of other people that day and thousands since have

³Erin Calabrese, "In Panic after Dallas Gunfire, Boy Finds Safety with Stranger," NBC News, July 9, 2016; available online at: <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/dallas-police-ambush/panic-after-dallas-gunfire-boy-finds-safety-stranger-n606341>.

responded with help and compassion in answer to prayers that have been offered in the midst of this tragedy.

I could go on and on, but you know what I mean. People who have specific needs pray to God for someone to help them. When you are that someone, you are an answer to prayer. Someone has been praying for you.

This prayer business is much larger than individual, specific requests, however. I believe that we each have a calling in life, a path that we follow for a reason. Sometimes that calling and those paths change because we are needed to do something else. That calling is sometimes a career path. Our children need teachers who are caring and creative and dedicated. We all need physicians who are insightful, knowledgeable, and compassionate. We need elected leaders who care about their communities, our state, and this nation. We need volunteers to serve in the many non-profits which benefit our community. We need business owners who are good employers and honest merchants. We need skilled public servants who will keep the power on, the water running, and our streets safe. We need ministers who will comfort as well as challenge us, artists who will stir our spirits and save our souls, scientists who will think beyond us, and ethicists who will keep our fears in check. We need people to serve in every capacity of life who understand their passion and skills as a calling in life, an opportunity to love God while loving neighbor.

The past few weeks have been difficult ones for our nation and our world. Terrorist attacks, deaths through altercations with police, attacks on police, natural disasters, and routine challenges of living have hit us like a punch in the gut and we are still reeling. Thankfully, as we have prayed for help, God has responded by using us to answer those prayers.

Oftentimes we feel inadequate to meet some of the opportunities and challenges that come our way but remember that the Samaritan was the most unlikely person to help the half-dead Jew in the ditch. It would be like an illegal immigrant helping Donald Trump or Mr. Trump helping Hillary Clinton. Jesus' story was absurd because Jews and Samaritans harbored deep hatred and bruised feelings that went back a long way. It was even suggested that Jews, who were commanded to love their neighbor, were not required to save the life of a Samaritan. How ironic, how absurd, how like an answer to prayer it was for a Samaritan to be the one to stop and help the half-dead Jew in the ditch whose wish for him otherwise might well have been death.

Who is praying for you? I don't mean for your healing or happiness or general well-being. Who is praying for you to be the one to answer their prayer? In what ways is God nudging you to be an answer to prayer? How is God preparing you to answer prayers in the future? What prayer can you answer today?

By the grace of God, perhaps our wishes will become prayers and we will answer them for one another, turning enemies into friends and strangers into beloved neighbors. Amen.

July 10, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

How grateful we are, O God, that when we realize our heartbeats are taps on the door of our life, you are the One asking to enter and dwell with us. How fortunate we are that you love us enough to risk our rejection and to persist in our salvation. How blessed we are that you want to be our companion for life.

Thank you for unflinching compassion and undeterred guidance. Thank you for unfailing support and uncompromising expectation of repentance. Thank you for unabridged grace and for unwavering demand for righteousness.

We are also thankful, O Lord, for the many ways you help us through this life. Once again we pray for ourselves and for one another. We need good care when we are ill and treatments that are beneficial. We need support and encouragement and hope that will never fade. When we are dismayed and confused, we need someone to guide us to a better path and walk along with us. When we must make difficult decisions, we need wisdom and guidance. When we are sad and lonely and afraid, we need someone to love and comfort us. When we are excited and joyful, we need someone with whom to share our happiness. When we experience the goodness of life, we need others with whom to share.

It has been another difficult week in our nation and throughout our world, O God. Hatred and fear have attempted to trump understanding and compassion. We pray for the families who have lost loved ones to violence. We pray for law enforcement officers who face a tremendous challenge to keep us safe and to be safe themselves. We pray for communities that want a better life for all people and need to find a way to that place. We pray for ourselves that we will discover your kingdom in our midst and learn how to live it into reality.

As young people and adults scatter throughout our community this week, we pray that their work as well as their cheerfulness will be infectious. Bless them with safety, energy, and a sense of their place in our world. Bless the homeowners whom we help. May we all realize that we are neighbors to one another and to all in this community. Bless the work and the workers. Bless the spirit of charity that it will permeate all of our lives. Illumine our lives with the light of your Spirit and gladden us with the beauty of our work, we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.