



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

NOVEMBER 15, 2015
THE TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

What If ? Genesis 12:1-3; Luke 10:25-37

I have to admit that, in light of the terrorist attacks in Paris on Friday evening, preaching a sermon to motivate this congregation to support our ministries financially feels like the last thing I want to do. When young people attending a concert, couples out for a nice dinner, and families watching a soccer match are targets of homicidal zealots, talking about paying for utilities, Sunday School materials, choir anthems, insurance, and salaries feels somehow wrong. It is not because the things we do and the ways in which we spend our offerings are wrong. Quite to the contrary. These are the good things that God calls us to do in life. It should go without saying that in light of all the evil in the world, all of the hurt and suffering that is an unfortunate part of life or directly caused by other people, good, generous people of faith ought to support the church which nurtures their soul and cares for them and the people in this community? I understand why NPR, United Way, and the American Red Cross have to convince me to donate to their causes, but my church should never have to compete for my offerings. I know that many of you feel the same way, and I am grateful.

I have come to think that part of the problem is that we take stories like the parable we just heard too literally. By that, I mean that we forget it is a parable, a story that is intended to cause us to think about how we act as people of faith. Instead, I think we often accept it as a representation of how life works. This particular parable is so familiar to us that every one of us could tell the story by heart. Sure, we might miss a detail or two along the way. Was the man going from Jerusalem to Jericho or from Jericho up to Jerusalem? Did the priest pass by first or was it the Levite who first ignored the man on the side of the road? When the Samaritan helped the man, did they stop at an inn that had no room?

Some of the details may be a bit blurry, but we know the story. A man was traveling and was attacked by robbers who beat him and left him dying on the side of the road. A religious person—a priest—came upon the man but passed by on the other side of the road. A little while later, another religious person—a Levite—came along but passed by as well. Thank God for the

Samaritan who came along but did not pass by. He stopped and helped the man and saved his life.

Thank goodness there always seems to be a Samaritan close by, someone who will do what no one else wants to do. I think a new version of the parable would be that we have come to depend on there always being a Good Samaritans in our lives.

I don't have time to take out the garbage, but it needs to go out today. Dad always checks and he will take it out. A good Samaritan!

I hate making up my bed which drives Mom crazy. I know that she will do it because it makes my room look nicer. A good Samaritan.

I have helped with the fall festival at school every year the children have been there, but I have noticed that whenever someone else doesn't show up, Mary steps in and does their job. She will be there for me this year! A good Samaritan.

I know I need to sell these raffle ticket for the club, but I hate asking people for money. Besides, Bill always finds out if we are short of our goal and makes up the difference. What's another \$100 to him? A good Samaritan.

There are so many children in our schools struggling to read. I have heard about churches that offer tutoring after school, but our church does so much already. Maybe that congregation down the street will realize the need and do something. A hope for a Good Samaritan.

But what if the Samaritan were to pass by on the other side as well? Remember that Samaritans were generally despised by the Jews. What if he saw the dying man but thought it was a trap? What if he recognized the man as someone who had been rude and abusive to him in the market? Why help him? What if he simply did not feel like taking a risk and helping today?

Listening to the news reports trickle in on Friday night, I heard one man describe escaping from the concert hall in Paris as terrorists sprayed the hall with bullets. At one point, he was stepping over bodies, not knowing whether

or not the people were alive, when he saw a girl who was wounded. He picked her up and carried her to safety. A Good Samaritan. I heard that many people in the neighborhood of the concert hall were opening their homes to strangers who were stranded in the city with no means to get home. Good Samaritans.

I imagine that there were many people in that concert hall who had a split-second opportunity to escape to safety. Fear, adrenaline, and shock sent them running right by people who were crying for help. That reaction is understandable, but it is not the action of a Good Samaritan.

We count on Good Samaritans in just about every aspect of our lives. The Good Samaritan will come through even if I don't. But what if the Good Samaritan does not help? There goes Jesus' illustration of what it means to be a neighbor and to fulfill the call of God on our lives. And there goes the Jewish man on the side of the road. Or, what if the Samaritan helps but the Innkeeper refuses to let the wounded man stay in his inn or does not trust the Samaritan to pay up when he comes back that way? In truth, helping a good cause requires not only a Good Samaritan but a Good Innkeeper and a whole series of Good People who will do what is right and good and necessary.

The point is that we have come to depend on there being a Good Samaritan coming up behind us when we pass by on the other side. Someone else will take care of it. Someone else will do what is needed. Someone else will help.

What if the Samaritan did not stop and help? What if no one stopped to help? We have no idea who this wounded man was or what story of his life was yet to unfold? What if he lived in Jerusalem and had a little donkey that he might on occasion loan to someone for a special occasion such as Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem? What if the man had a large upper room above his home which he allowed friends to use on special events like the annual Passover celebration? What if this wounded man's name was Saul, a rabbi zealous to protect the Jewish faith, who one day might encounter Jesus and become a great missionary for the Christian faith? What if the Good Samaritan did not help and the Jewish man died, cutting short his life and legacy and good deeds?

You may remember the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. At the conclusion of the story, Private Ryan, now an old man, stands before a white marble cross in the American cemetery at Normandy, France. It is the grave of

Captain Miller who was given the task of finding Private Ryan and sending him home because he was the last survivor of four soldier brothers. As his wife moves to his side, he begs her to tell him that he lived a good life, that he lived worthy of the sacrifice made so that he could live. The children and grandchildren gathered behind this old soldier are evidence of what his life has meant.

We may not ever fully realize what good our generosity might do, but we usually find out quickly what happens when we do not do what we ought to do.

Churches are like Good Samaritans in many ways. We want to help the person in the ditch as well as other travelers along the way. Let us ask ourselves what if Lakeside were not here? What difference would it make?

My Sister's House would have no fence, no playground, and no meditation garden. There would be no little libraries around town to encourage children and adults to read. There would be no Chrismon Tree in the Palladian window during Advent and Christmas to give cheer and offer hope to people passing by. There would be no history of close to sixty years of children educated in our preschool program, of thousands of people exploring the Bible here, making their professions of faith, being baptized, getting married, celebrating their lives at the end. Hundreds of homes would not have been rehabilitated by Gatekeepers Workcamp. One less church would have supported our homeless shelters, our Meals on Wheels ministry, our prison ministries, our counseling ministry, and all of the other ways we reach out in this community. What if Lakeside were not here? Would it make a difference to your life? To this community? To the world?

The Good Samaritan did stop and it made a huge difference to the injured man. What we do in and through this congregation makes a huge difference to many people. So why not be the Good Samaritan, the Good Neighbor who recognizes the resources God has given us and uses them as an expression of love for God and one another?

Sometimes we feel as if we have nothing to offer. We are not as talented as another, we don't have as much money as another, we don't have the free time or the energy that other people have. Do we look at them as our Good Samaritans? The truth is that God has gifted us all in numerous ways. It is our responsibility to discover those gifts. In one of her poems, Peggy

Haymes reminds us of how important it is to acknowledge what God has given us:

Gifts

I looked at the circle of faces
and asked a simple question.
“What are your gifts?”
And there was much coughing
and clearing of throats,
and shifting of seats,
and silence.

Can it be, God,
that you forgot to give this group
any gifts at all?
Can it be, God, that you overlooked them,
that they slipped through
while skipping this step?

Or maybe it's not the gifts we're missing.
Maybe it's the eyes to see them.
To see the gift
in being able to bake a fresh coconut cake
or to fix a phone
as well as singing a solo.
To see the gift
in sending the perfect card
or growing the flowers
as well as teaching the class.

Maybe it's not the gifts we're missing,
but the celebration of them.
We don't want to brag on ourselves.
We don't want to be proud.

God,
we'd be furious if a friend
received our gifts
the way we receive yours.
If they hid them away in a closet or drawer.
If they acted as if

the gift we'd been so careful to give
wasn't worth anything.

God, how do you feel
when we declare
we have no gifts to offer?

What do you think
when we declare
that what you've given us
with such great love
isn't really very good?¹

God has given us all many gifts and, through Abraham, called us to be a blessing in the world, a Good Samaritan traveling through life, ready to respond to the needs around us. What if we discovered our gifts and began to use them? What if we come up with new ministry ideas and funded and staffed them? What if we realized that what happens in Paris and Syria and Afghanistan and on Branch Street impacts our lives but that we can also impact life for others? What if we believed God has called us together, commissioned us to share the Gospel, and gifted us to do so? What if we realize that we may well be the Good Samaritan for someone else?

What if our question changes from "What if?" to "What now?"

¹Peggy Haymes, *Heart Prayers: Poems Prayers, & Meditations* (Macon: Peake Road, 1997), 49-50.

November 15, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Holy and merciful God, we give you thanks that you have called out faithful witnesses and have continued to reveal your Word of truth in all times and places. And we give you thanks that you call us and speak to us in this place and for our own time. Our faith teaches us, O God, that out of your great love for us and for all your creation, you send us out with the task of sharing that love with others. You sent our first fathers and mothers in the faith into new lands in order to be a light and a blessing to the nations. Your followers in many generations have been called to participate in your work of reconciliation, mercy and peace. We, too, know what it means to be called by you, to respond to your commandment to go to our community, our nation and our world sharing the good news of your love and mercy for all your children and believing that even through the fragile vessels of our lives, your Holy Spirit can accomplish the work of making all things new.

But even as we recognize that your call to love and share and serve is much the same for us as it has been for believers of every age, we know that much in our world has changed. To show compassion to those of various languages and customs and faith traditions no longer requires that we cross oceans because the world has come to us. We need only to look around our own schools and markets to notice the colorful shades of your creativity in the faces we see. We need only to listen in our own neighborhoods and places of business to hear the beautiful chorus of accents that reveal the complexity and diversity of the human experience. But we need only to turn on our television sets to see horrific images of violence because of ancient divisions and ongoing hatred and conflict. And yet you have called us to live together in harmony rather than discord, to seek peaceful ways of doing and being rather than emphasize those differences which distinguish us one from another, to respond in love and mercy in order to honor your image that we find in each one we encounter.

Give us ears to hear the beauty of your promises in the voice of each person we meet. Give us eyes to see the gifts you have placed within them. Give us minds agile enough to imagine justice for those who have known oppression. Give us hands strong enough to accomplish your work. Give us feet courageous enough to follow you wherever your children need to know of the light and life you offer. As we go out from this place, give us hearts open enough to extend hospitality to both friend and stranger, recognizing that in so doing, we welcome you into our midst. And in all circumstances, give us spirits bold and unwavering enough to believe that our worship here and the compassion we extend to those we meet can make evident the fulfillment of our kingdom among us.

We pray in the name of the Christ who calls us and by the power of your Spirit who dwells with us. Amen

Elizabeth J. Edwards, Associate Minister