

“The Other Side”
Luke 10:25-37
16th Sunday after Pentecost

September 12, 2021
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

I’ll begin this morning’s sermon with a question that I am almost 100% sure I know the answer to:

How many of you, when you heard this story, were hearing it for the first time?

Raise your hand if you NEVER had heard this parable before.
Now...raise your hand if you heard this parable more times than you can count.

Exactly.

We’ve heard it so many times, we’re all sure we know what it means. Be like the Good Samaritan. When you’re on the journey of life and you see someone who’s hurting, don’t go to the other side of the road. Don’t be afraid of reaching out to your neighbor in need.

We all know what this parable is about, but I thought it might still help if we could find a good, modern-day version of this story. So I went looking for that story this week...

And the first story that came to mind was about someone who refused to stay on the other side—in this case it didn’t happen on the road. It happened at a subway stop.

A number of years ago in NY City, a gentleman named Wesley Autrey performed one of the most heroic and courageous deeds that any of us could imagine.

He was standing on a subway platform with his two little girls, ages 4 and 6 at the time. Suddenly, another man who was waiting for the train appeared to have a seizure, and that man fell down into the subway tracks.

Wesley Autrey did not know this man.

But without hesitation, Mr. Autrey jumped down into the tracks to try to retrieve this stranger from danger.

When he saw that the oncoming train was approaching too quickly, and wouldn't give him enough time to lift the man up to safety, instead of scrambling back up to the platform, Wesley Autrey pressed the man down into the hollow of the tracks,
and then lay over the body of the man,
keeping both of their bodies in between the rails.

The train cleared Autrey's head by inches.
Grease marks were said to be left on his knit cap!

When the train passed and came to a stop, Autrey called up to the people on the platform: "There are two little girls up there. Let them know their Daddy is ok."

Immediately, the story became known around the nation.
Autrey became a hero, appearing on tv morning talk shows.

One report tagged him "The Subway Superman."
Another labeled him "The Harlem Hero."
Yet a third headline read:

"Good Samaritan Saves Man on Subway Tracks."¹

¹ For this story, I am indebted to Tom Long's sermon, "Meeting the Good Samaritan," preached on Day1.org, July 15, 2007, [Meeting the Good Samaritan | Day 1](#).

What do you think?

Was Wesley Autrey a Good Samaritan?

Sure he was—just like the Samaritan risked his life on a dangerous road to save the wounded man, so too did Mr. Autrey...

And yet, there's a part of me that resists equating the Wesley Autrey story with our parable today, for a couple of reasons:

First, I could make a pretty good argument that it would also have been a responsible decision for Mr. Autrey to stay with his two daughters and call for help.

- What if Mr. Autrey had killed himself trying to save that man, and left his daughters without a father?

And second, even though Wesley Autrey did this wonderful thing, this heroic act...I doubt very much that I would have been that brave. So if I don't jump into the subway tracks, does that mean I become like the priest and the Levite? That I would have failed at being like the Good Samaritan?

The story of Wesley Autrey is a wonderful story of helping a neighbor in need...**but let's keep looking for a modern-day version of this parable.**

You know what the next story was that came to mind?

The story of this church.

Westminster has this marvelous history of providing HOSPITALITY for all God's children.

And the parable of the Good Samaritan is a story about radical hospitality—the Samaritan quite literally puts a roof over the wounded man’s head when that man had been left to die in a ditch.

So I thought about all the roofs that WPC has helped to put over the heads of different neighbors through the years:

- Our IHN ministry, that starts up again next week;
- All the homes we’ve sponsored through Habitat for Humanity;
- The \$100,000 gift that this church made to Greenville Housing, just a few short years ago;
- The cabins that our men have helped build and refurbish at Camp Thornwell, so that all the children at Thornwell will have a wonderful place to go every summer...

There is very much a sense in which all of you, through acts of hospitality and generosity, have been Good Samaritans through the years.

Put another way, this is a congregation committed to loving those
ON THE OTHER SIDE:

Whether it’s the other side of the economic spectrum, or the other side of the political aisle (whatever your politics may be), Westminster is a congregation that will not discriminate when it comes to showing hospitality toward God’s children, when it comes to maintaining an OPEN MIND and an OPEN HEART toward all God’s children.

Do you remember a couple weeks ago when I gave you 3 Amens in the sermon?

This week, I need to ask you for an Amen...

If I say that Westminster will show an open mind and an open heart to every child of God who comes across our path, and strive to provide radical hospitality and abundant generosity toward everyone who walks through our doors, what will you say?

(Amen.)

Let's try that one more time.

Amen!

Good, good...that's why I like to think that this church is a modern-day story of the Good Samaritan.

This past week, I heard a 9/11 story that may be a modern-day version of the Good Samaritan.

Orlando and Phyllis Rodriguez lost their son, Greg, in the North Tower on that horrific day two decades ago.

But instead of seeking vengeance, his parents advocated for peace and restraint. They helped found an organization called September 11 Families for Peaceful Tomorrows.

One of the upshots of all this was that Dr. and Mrs. Rodriguez met the mother of Zacarias Moussaoui, the infamous "20th hijacker" who never made it on the planes.

Over time, a bond was formed with Moussaoui's mother, and Orlando Rodriguez actually spoke at Zacarias Moussaoui's sentencing trial, to argue against Moussaoui receiving the death penalty.²

² Information for this story came from https://www.plough.com/en/topics/justice/social-justice/two-mothers-of-september-11?utm_source=weekly&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=090921, as well as [Professor Finds Restorative Justice, Reconciliation After 9/11 \(fordham.edu\)](#).

It reminded me of our parable, because they were reaching out to the other side...and in Jesus' day, that's what a Samaritan was. The other side.

John's Gospel is very clear that Jews shared nothing in common with Samaritans. But it was worse than that. Many times, they despised each other.

In chapter 9 of Luke's Gospel, when a Samaritan village refuses to welcome Jesus, the disciples respond by asking Jesus, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"

And Jesus reminds his disciples that maybe fire and brimstone is a bit of OVERKILL when someone fails to extend hospitality to you...

So instead, in chapter 10, Jesus tells a parable.

Walking the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, a man was robbed, beaten, and left for dead.

A priest comes along, but he passes by.

A Levite comes along, but he passes by.

Then an ordinary, faithful Israelite comes along the road—and when he sees the wounded man, he approaches him, he wants to help him, and then he notices—the wounded man is a Samaritan!

But this faithful Israelite...he doesn't think twice. He ignores the history of prejudice between his people and their people, and he treats this Samaritan just like he would treat a member of his own family. He takes care of the man, provides healing and hospitality for the man...he saves that Samaritan's life.

Go and do likewise, says Jesus.
Now that would have been a pretty good parable.
But of course, that's NOT the story Jesus told.

The one who provided help, the one who extended hospitality was not an ordinary, faithful Israelite—like those who were listening to the story when Jesus first told it.

The hero was a Samaritan!
As biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine notes:

“From the perspective of the man in the ditch, [the original Jewish audience that heard this parable] might balk at the idea of receiving Samaritan aid. They might have thought, ‘I’d rather die than acknowledge that one from that group saved me’...”³

In other words, for the people who first heard this parable, it wasn't just surprising or challenging.

It was OFFENSIVE!

And that's not how we like to think about the grace of God at work. We like to think of God's grace coming to us in ways we can swallow, in ways we can accept, in ways that won't reveal our blind spots—or if our blind spots get revealed, it will happen very gently...

For example, when I was serving at my previous church in Dallas, we had a refugee ministry there—a couple of times a year, we would partner with the International Rescue Committee and welcome refugees who had recently arrived in Dallas.

³ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, New York: HarperOne, 2014.

On one occasion, I found myself talking with an older couple who had come to the U.S. from Iraq.

They didn't know English, and the only way I was able to understand them was through a translator, who was a younger woman, also from Iraq. We had a lovely conversation.

When it was time for everyone to leave, I wanted to say thank you and goodbye, so I offered to shake the elderly woman's hand.

She demurred, and I thought she was just being modest. So I insisted on shaking her hand. Which she did, but then I caught the look on the translator's face...and I knew!

I had just made a careless mistake.

In her culture, it was not proper for a woman to shake the hand of a male stranger like me.

I apologized, and after the event ended and I was on my way home, I was kicking myself—how could I be so clueless?

Upon further reflection, however, I saw it as a moment of grace.

Because the elderly Iraqi woman—she forgave my mistake right away. I went into that Sunday thinking that our church was the one offering grace to the refugees who came...but on that day, with that particular refugee—she ended up offering grace to me.

And the good part about it was that it was grace that did not hurt me, did not offend me—it simply helped open my mind and my heart about the guests who were at our church that day.

If only that were the kind of grace Jesus described in this parable.

You see, I'd really like to find a modern-day rendition of this parable, but that's going to require a few things that I don't want to imagine.

First, it's going to require that I see myself not as the hero of the story, but as the person who has been left for dead on the side of the road, in desperate need of someone else's help and grace.

Second, it's going to require that grace will arrive from someone I **COULD NEVER IMAGINE** coming to help me, someone I don't really want to help me!

Can you picture anyone in your life whom you would have a hard time accepting help from right now? If they reached out a hand to help you, you really wouldn't want to take that hand?

And third, it's going to require me **NOT HAVING A CHOICE** in the matter. That's the part that really gets under my skin. Because I want this to be a parable about choices—about my ability to choose the right side of the road to walk, to be like the Good Samaritan.

But what if this is **ALSO** a parable about what happens to us when we don't have a choice? When life has spun out of control, and we don't get a say in what will happen next...

Will God's grace come to us?

Oh yes, says Jesus...but that grace may not arrive in ways that we expect. It's grace that may upset us, baffle us, and reveal our **BLIND SPOTS** to us...

I wonder if any of you have seen the Charlie Chaplain film “City Lights.”

It was the LAST of Chaplain’s silent films,
and Charlie once again plays the tramp.

The tramp always seems to be in trouble, and this time Charlie escapes across a busy intersection by running through doors of waiting vehicles.

When he steps to the curb from the last vehicle, which happens to be a limousine, he’s greeted by a young woman who also happens to be blind. She supposes that Charlie is a rich man stopping to buy her flowers. So Charlie gives her his LAST COIN—and commences a friendship in which she, in her blindness, imagines Charlie to be a wealthy young bachelor.

One day in courting her, Charlie reads an ad in the newspaper for a new, but EXPENSIVE cure for blindness.

He approaches a rich man, who, through the film,
has befriended Charlie in times of drunkenness,
and in his inebriated stupor,
he gives Charlie the needed sum.

Charlie gets the money to the young woman, but when the rich man sobers up, he of course doesn’t recognize Charlie, and he accuses the tramp of stealing the money.

Charlie ends up in prison, and the young woman ends up with her sight.

Later, the little tramp is released from prison,
poorer and shabbier than ever.

At the end of the film,
 as he walks down the street, he's teased by some boys,
 and moves on, only to come across a FLOWER SHOP!

It belongs to the young woman, the one Charlie had befriended.

Of course, she doesn't recognize him, and she joins the boys in laughing at the tramp. The tramp turns away, but the woman—feeling a little guilty—goes after the tramp, offering him a flower...

Slowly, the tramp comes back, takes the flower—
 and in giving him the flower, she touches his hand,
 and then his shoulder...it triggers a memory!

She's touched that hand and that shoulder before!

She KNOWS WHO IT IS!

NO!

The one who helped her, who gave her her sight...is the tramp?

“You?” she says.

Charlie smiles.

“You can see now,” says the tramp.

“Yes,” she replies,
 confused, dumbfounded, grateful....

“I can see now...”

(Amen.)