

St. Andrew Presbyterian
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THE RISK OF BEING A NEIGHBOR

Luke 10:25-37

It's a story we know all too well. An unfortunate soul mugged and left for dead by the side of the road. Two religious functionaries pass by on the other side. Then a Samaritan, a despised foreigner of sorts, stops, renders aid, and takes the victim to be cared for with money out of his own pocket. It is a random act of kindness, a remarkable display of mercy and generosity. Not to mention risk. Jesus remarks that this Samaritan proved himself to be quite a neighbor to one unknown to him.

This parable points out the risk of being a neighbor—the risk of danger, the risk of getting involved, the risk of lost time, even lost money. And yet this act has taken on a name of its own—simply the Good Samaritan. We all know what it means, we think. And we all feel the inherent risk of such behavior. This morning I share with you three stories, all three Good Samaritan stories, all three taking place in Texas.

Story number one. From 1978-1980 I was the Associate Pastor at the First Presbyterian Church of Victoria, Texas, some 120 miles west of Houston. Virtually every Sunday for two years I taught church school from 9:30 until 10:30am and then drove twenty miles to a little town named Goliad. There I would lead the 11am morning worship at this small country church. One hot summer day I decided to ride my motorcycle over to Goliad. Not thinking I put my billfold in my jacket pocket. My coat flapped wildly in the wind on the ride over. And yes, you guessed it, my billfold flew out and I didn't even realize it.

So I arrive in Goliad and there I am preaching in the pulpit. Off to the side of the pulpit area was the church office with a phone. I had actually never heard the phone ring. But in the middle of my sermon, the phone rang. So I said, "Hold tight, I'll see if this is an emergency." On the other end of the line, someone said, "Could I speak to Frank Yates?" And I was so taken aback, I simply said, "Speaking." Of course, they didn't know that what I meant was, "Currently I am speaking—from behind a pulpit!" Then this nice person said to me, "Well, we found your billfold and its contents scattered all over the Goliad highway. We found your card with your church's phone number. Could we get it to you?" Utterly astonished, I put my hand into my coat jacket and sure enough it was empty! I could hardly find words. Then we made arrangements to meet after church at Goliad's

one restaurant, from which they were calling. That was in the days before cell phones!

So I came back to the pulpit and explained what happened. The congregation literally broke out into applause. It really was a stunning act of kindness and neighborliness. The rest of the sermon was a very brief meditation on the parable of the Good Samaritan. And by the way, the meeting with this wonderful couple for lunch was just delightful. They told me that all their lives they had tried to be Good Samaritans. They were devoted Christians and this parable meant a lot to them. Ever since then, that parable has always been associated in my mind with them.

Story number two. One of the most challenging students I had during fourteen years of campus ministry was a graduate student in engineering at Texas A&M University named Bob. Challenging because when I first met him, he was not a Christian and rather hostile to the entire notion of faith. Turns out he had been burned by an earlier brush with some very judgmental fundamentalists. Nevertheless, Bob kept coming to our meetings and let's just say he carried a rather large chip on his shoulders. Later he would admit he was testing us to see if we would really accept him warts and all. The campus ministry group I led tried very hard to love and accept him. In fact, they were remarkably successful, by the grace of God. One of the happiest occasions of my three years at A&M was the Sunday morning when I baptized Bob.

Well, I wish I could say we all lived happily ever after. But not quite. Bob remained deeply attached to his gun collection, which was enormous. A devoted member of the NRA, Bob had some rather strong views on a citizen's right to bear arms, especially concealed weapons, especially his beloved 9-millimeter pistol. He insisted upon carrying it with him at all times, even to church. We had many discussions why that was necessary. Needless to say, it led to an uneasy truce. In the presence of determined young men who are armed, I generally find ways to reach a separate peace.

So Bob came to our weekly Bible study one Friday night when we were studying the Good Samaritan parable. Bob said he had a story to share, something that had happened to him the previous Tuesday evening. He was driving his car south of College Station when he came upon a man who was involved in an altercation with a woman beside their parked car. The woman was down on the ground and the man was kicking her. Bob pulled up behind them and urged the man, who was apparently quite drunk, to stop. The drunken man ignored Bob and continued to thrash the woman.

Bob came up to the man, simply uncovered his 9-millimeter, never drawing it from the holster. The man took one look at that pistol and

immediately stopped beating the woman. In fact, he got in the car and sped off. So there Bob was with an injured woman on his hand. He immediately took her to the hospital and got her medical attention. Needless to say, Bob told this story to make his case. Here was the moral of the story, in his mind-if you want to be a Good Samaritan, you better be packing heat!

Story number three. On December 11, 1978, just north of College Station a 27 year old A&M employee named Timothy Merka was driving home from work. Seeing a disabled car on that rural road, Merka pulled over to offer help. Two young brothers Danny and Curtis Harris, aged 17 and 18 at the time, had stolen a car which had subsequently broken down. When Merka stopped, the brothers acted very appreciative. Then they turned on this A&M employee, who pleaded for his life. Danny held Merka while Curtis clubbed him to death with a tire tool. The two brothers then stole his wallet and drove away in Merka's pickup truck.

Fifteen years later in 1993 my friend Rev. Carroll Pickett met up with the two brothers on death row at Huntsville. Rev. Pickett, the prison chaplain, accompanied both brothers into the execution chamber, Curtis Harris on July 1 and Danny Harris on July 30. I talked with Carroll this past week and he remembered well these brothers, then in their 30's. And I remember well when Carroll first told me their story years ago in College Station. He called it the Good Samaritan homicide.

The story of the Good Samaritan is rich and challenging. Jesus told it no doubt to illustrate that even the despised Samaritans could become a neighbor by acting like a neighbor. I have shared with you three stories of Good Samaritans, each involving ever-greater risks. The couple who gathered up the scattered contents of my billfold lost some time. But we ended up having a splendid time together and even to this day I remember them with deep affection.

My friend Bob risked quite a bit more in coming upon that couple engaged in an altercation. Who was to know what that drunken man would have done? But of course Bob was armed with a 9-millimeter pistol, which he was all too willing to use if necessary.

Finally Timothy Merka found himself in a truly tragic and deadly situation as he stopped to render aid to Danny and Curtis Harris. His situation evokes our deepest fears about getting involved anywhere at anytime. It is why we often pass by on the other side.

Three Good Samaritans stories. Three kinds of risks. Three distinct outcomes. In Luke 10, the same chapter with the Good Samaritan, Luke tells the story of Jesus sending his disciples out to announce that the Kingdom of God was drawing near. Jesus told them, "Go your way;

behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves”(Lk. 10:3). But he promised that he would be with them, even though they had no money, no bag, no sandals. His guiding Spirit would accompany them throughout Israel as they brought the peace of Christ to all who would welcome them. And Jesus suggested that when they were not well received, then they should wipe the dust from their feet and move on to those who would.

Jesus is certainly aware of the risks facing his disciples, like lambs in the midst of wolves. And yet he sends them forth with His peace and blessing. The risks are real. The blessing of Christ is also very real, the peace of Christ that surpasses all understanding. Likewise, to understand this parable I think we need to see it as a description of Jesus himself. Jesus is finally the Good Samaritan, the one who stoops to conquer. Jesus finds us needy along life’s roadside and rescues us and binds up our wounds.

And yet it is more than that. In the process, Jesus lays down his life for us, truly the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Greater love has no one than this-that one lays down one’s life for others. Here Jesus willingly offers us aid even as the wolves descend upon the lamb. No one else could have rendered us such aid as does Christ our Lord. Truly, he alone is the Good Samaritan.

And yet at the end of the parable, Jesus, realizing the risks of offering aid, says to us these stunning words, “Go and do likewise. Go among the wolves, risk yourself. Be my loving and healing presence in a world filled with need and hurt. Represent me and offer my peace-regardless.”

There is the story of the Italian composer Giacomo Puccini who in 1922 was stricken with throat cancer. At the time he was working on what would be his final opera “Turandot”. He said to his students, “If I don’t finish ‘Turandot’, I want you to finish it for me.” When Puccini died, his student Franco Alfano composed the final scenes. On April 25, 1926, in Milan, Italy, the world premier of “Turandot” was performed. One of Puccini’s favorite students Arturo Toscanini directed the opera.

Everything went beautifully until the opera reached the middle of the third act where Puccini had been forced to put down his pen. Here Toscanini stopped the music, put down his baton, and turned to the audience with tears in his eyes, “Thus far the Master wrote, but then he died.” A vast silence filled the opera house. Then Toscanini picked up the baton again, smiled through his tears and exclaimed, “But his disciples finished his work.” The audience burst into thunderous applause.

“Go and do likewise.”