

## ***Just Passing By***

A Sermon for Worship on the Fourth Sunday of Lent  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

March 26, 2017

Text: Luke 10:25-37

The Parable of the Good Samaritan, the text we read this morning from the Gospel of Luke, is yet another of those stories we hear so often that we think we know what it says. We think we know what it means. It's a great story, to be sure. It's even a little reassuring when it surfaces in church once again because we can think, "Oh yes, I know *that* one!" In fact, it's so well-known that it's almost trite. We see its storyline again and again in books, in movies and even in television. Someone gets hurt. People who should be the first to help don't or won't and the least likely person to help is the one who steps forward and saves the day for the hapless victim.

The reluctant hero could be the name for this story genre. John Wayne was fond of these roles appearing in several well known films which followed this storyline – *The Angel and the Bad Man*, *The Searchers* and *True Grit* just to name a few. Humphrey Bogart in *Casa Blanca* is another classic example of the reluctant hero – someone forced by circumstances beyond his control to do something extraordinary for someone else he barely knows. Harrison Ford is yet another actor who excels in these unlikely hero roles like Han Solo in the *Star Wars* films and Indiana Jones in the *Indiana Jones* movie series.

We love these characters. Something inside us connects with them in a way that's difficult to describe. We love their gruff, "I don't give a damn" exteriors belied by the fact that over and over again, they can't walk away from someone in trouble, even though everything inside them seems to be urging them to do just that. They overcome their own shortcomings, their own fears, their own reluctance to create any kind of connection with another human being and in so doing, they save the day. They are literally heroes who never intended to be heroes. It just happened. It's this accidental nature of how they become heroes that appeals to us, I think. In them we see hope for ourselves that, deep down inside, we might be heroes. They let us believe that, given the right circumstances, maybe we could save the day too.

Now of course Jesus does not tell the Parable of the Good Samaritan as a reluctant hero story. He tells it as a parable and by definition a parable is a story told to make a specific point. Jesus used parables all the time to help people understand what he was trying to teach them since it was so very different from the way people thought and lived in his context. This parable of the Good Samaritan is no different. It used characters Jesus' contemporaries would immediately have known – an innocent victim, a priest, a Levite and a Samaritan – in a geographic area they were familiar with, the road between Jericho and Jerusalem. They would have known this was a very dangerous stretch of highway,

prone to bandits who preyed on solitary travelers, especially the ones they thought had money. They would have wondered why the man who was attacked would be so foolish as to be traveling that road by himself, but no matter. The victim is a necessary but almost incidental part of Jesus' story. It's the other characters that would have drawn his audience deeper into his message.

The priest would have been instantly recognizable to them. Even those who hadn't actually seen a priest because they hadn't been to the great Temple in Jerusalem would have known about them. They would have heard about how splendidly the priests would have been dressed. They would know how well educated they were, not only in the Torah but also in all the many intricacies of the Temple rituals and sacrifices. After all, the priests held the keys to being in right relationship with God. It was the priests who would have to declare you clean once more after an illness or an injury, or an unfortunate incident in which you broke one of the thousands of rules for right behavior in the Pentateuch. It was the priests who would have final say over whether the animal and birds brought for sacrifice in the Temple were pure enough for the task at hand. So, when the priest entered the scene, the crowd would have held their breath. What would this holiest of men do? Would he help, risking uncleanness himself through contact with the injured man's blood? They didn't have long to wait for an answer. Jesus said,

“he passed by on the other side.” Not only did he not help, he crossed by to the other side of the roadway to make sure he didn’t risk any contamination from this unknown man.

But wait, Jesus piqued their interest again as he said a Levite came by next. The Levites were also holy men, but not in the same way as the priests. They were the true experts in the Pentateuch and the Torah in its entirety. They were by their heredity as Levites the keepers of the holy scrolls, the guardians of the knowledge of the history and religion of Israel. Again, the crowd would be holding their breath. Would this learned man stop to help? If anyone would know a way around all the rules pertaining to coming into contact with blood and the inherent mess such a situation as the injured man presented, it would be the Levite. But again, Jesus didn’t keep them waiting long. The Levite also crossed the road to get away from the injured man rather than risking the many dangers of helping a bleeding, unknown stranger.

But then, the story took an even crazier turn when Jesus described the next person to come upon the injured man. It was a Samaritan, a hated Samaritan! No, surely this man would not stop to help. Everyone knew that Samaritans were evil and lazy. Everyone knew that Samaritans cared about no one but themselves. After all, didn’t they claim to know and worship the same God as the Jews? Didn’t they even dare to claim ancestry

from the ancient tribes? No, surely a Samaritan could not be the one who would stop and help the injured man! That's just not possible. But, as Jesus continued talking, it became clear that it was the Samaritan who would be this man's rescuer. Unlike the priest and the Levite who crossed to the other side of the road, the Samaritan walked right up to him, knelt down and began to see how he could help. "When he saw him, he was moved with pity," Jesus says. He bandaged the man's wounds, cleaning them first with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, probably a donkey, and took him to an inn where he made sure the injured man was settled comfortably. The next day before continuing on his own journey, the Samaritan gave the innkeeper two denarii saying, "Take care of him and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." That's nice, we think. But it was way more than nice. Two denarii would have been enough money to pay for the man's room and board at the inn for two months. Two months! For someone he didn't know at all. Wow!

And now Jesus gets to the moral of his story, told for the benefit of a smart alec lawyer-type young man who had asked him, "who is my neighbor?" during an earlier exchange about how to gain eternal life. He looks at the young man who probably had a shocked look on his face after hearing the story and asks, "which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man?" The young man answered, "the one who showed him mercy" without

hesitation. “Go and do likewise,” Jesus says bringing the story to an abrupt end.

Go and do likewise. Show mercy without reservation and without getting hung up on whether or not the person deserves your help. Show mercy whether or not it will cost you something more than you think you are willing to pay. Show mercy when it is unpopular, even maybe dangerous. Show mercy because showing mercy is the only way to receive mercy yourself. Mercy is boundless kindness that has been saturated by God’s grace. It is more than doing the right thing, although that’s part of it. Mercy is loving your neighbor, loving the other, as much as, and in some cases more than, you love yourself. That’s what makes mercy so precious, and rare – more rare than it should be in society for sure but especially amongst people who claim to love and serve God.

To put this in a more contemporary context and make clear just how powerful and extraordinary the message of Jesus in this story really is, listen as I retell the story using contemporary characters instead of the usual biblical ones we’re used to:

*A visiting business man was making his way back to his hotel in a strange city after leaving a late night business meeting at a local restaurant just a few blocks from his hotel. He was still thinking about the meeting so he didn’t notice the group of thugs who fell into step behind him. Before he knew what was happening they pulled him into an alley, beat him up and stole his wallet, watch, cell phone and laptop. Then, hearing a noise,*

*they took off running. The man was dazed and his head was pounding. He tried to get up but after taking a few steps he collapsed back on the ground. "At least I'm closer to the end of the alley," he said to himself. He settled back against the wall of the building, confident someone would soon see him in the feeble circle of light. Sure enough, in a few minutes he heard footsteps and a Catholic priest came into view, the street light clearly illuminating the starchy white of his Roman collar. "Surely this priest will help me," he thought. But no such luck. The priest glanced at him, snorted something about the sin of public drunkenness and hurried on his way. Tears stung the injured man's eyes.*

*He knew he was badly hurt so there was nothing to do but wait there for someone to see him. In a few minutes, more footsteps and loud talking. They were talking about the wonderful prayer revival they had just attended, the wonderful teachings they had just received from their pastor. Surely these people would help him! They rounded the corner, glanced down the alley where he lay and stopped, staring at him. He could see the huge crosses hanging from their necks glinting in the feeble street light. He could see every detail of the "Jesus Saves" t-shirts they were wearing. Yes, surely they would help him. But they didn't. They stopped talking and just hurried away mumbling something about not wanting to get involved.*

*By now the man was starting to hurt all over. "Why will no one help me?" he wondered. He closed his eyes, the pain in his head and jaw becoming unbearable. He must have passed out for a few minutes because he woke to find someone gently calling to him. "Mister, mister, you alright?" said a female voice with a strong accent. Mexican maybe? Or Puerto Rican? "Mister, mister, what happened?" He opened his eyes and choked out, "I*

was mugged.” “Oh Dios mio,” she responded. She pulled out her cell phone and dialed 911. He heard her explaining the situation in halting English just before he passed out again. “At least she’s called the police before she takes off like the others,” he thought before the blackness enveloped him once more.

He awoke to paramedics trying to rouse him as they assessed his injuries. They gently placed him on a gurney, all the while doing everything they could to ease his pain. A police officer came over and started asking him some questions but he was having a difficult time answering. Then, as they lifted the gurney into the ambulance, he saw the woman talking with the police. They seemed to be giving her a rough time. “She’s the only one who helped me!” he thought. “Leave her alone,” he croaked out. One of the policemen came over to him then. “Sir, we think she’s an illegal. She claims she isn’t, that she left her green card at home where it would be safe, but we’re not buying it. Can’t be too careful these days.”

The man gingerly reached into his trouser pocket hoping what he was searching for was still there and it was. “I said, leave her alone.” Then he handed the officer his business card. Sighing loudly the officer lifted the card into the dim light so he could read it better. “John W. Mortimer, Esq.” was the name. Then he read the second line and his hand started to shake, “Special Legal Counsel, Department of Homeland Security.”

“Yes, sir,” the officer responded quickly. He went back over to the woman and the other officers, gestured toward the injured man and then turned to the woman. They talked to her softly, and the man on the gurney once again heard her lilting voice murmur, “Oh Dios mio!” She walked over to the ambulance. “Gracias, Senor! Muchas gracias!”



*“De nada,” he croaked out. “Muchas gracias!” pointing to her. Just then, the med techs intervened, “we gotta roll now!” they said to the woman. The woman backed away and, just as they slammed the door shut, she waved and made the sign of the cross as a blessing for him, he knew. He also knew he would never be the same man he was before he was beaten in that alley. He had learned firsthand that mercy was the most courageous act anyone could ever make. He also knew that mercy would undergird his own life and work in a way it never had before. “Thank you, Jesus” he thought as he finally settled back.*

Thank you, Jesus, for opening eyes and hearts in new and surprising ways. May ours be opened to your truth always.

Amen.