

***“Summer Shorts, Vol. 1: Holiday Road”***

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**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**

**14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

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**Introduction:**

Every page of the Bible has two sides: Comfort and challenge. It is the very nature of the gospel to provide us the comforting good news of God’s great mercy and steadfast love all the while challenging us to respond to God’s mercy and steadfast love with our very lives; by learning it, sharing it, living lives shaped by it.

They are like opposite sides of the same page. On one side we read comfort, but then we flip the page and find the challenge. So, for the remainder of July, as we are gathered together in one place to worship, we will do exactly that. We will revisit some of the Bible’s most familiar stories and look at both sides of the page, exploring how we are comforted by them and challenged by them. I will attempt to do it literally on one page, front and back, comfort and challenge; challenge and comfort. (*Note: for purposes of this distribution manuscript, this single sheet format will not be maintained.* )

This week: the parable of “The Good Samaritan.”

**Scripture Reading: Luke 10:25-37**

<sup>25</sup>Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”  
<sup>26</sup>He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” <sup>27</sup>He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>28</sup>And He said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” <sup>29</sup>But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” <sup>30</sup>Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup>Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup>So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup>But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. <sup>34</sup>He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. <sup>35</sup>The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ <sup>36</sup>Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” <sup>37</sup>He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”



***Sermon: “Summer Shorts, Vol. 1: Holiday Road”***

Summer is about vacation and nothing says vacation like a road trip. So, it seems appropriate that we begin our series of “Summer Shorts” by taking up the story of one man who ventured forth on an epic journey and found the going exceptionally tough. No, not Clark Griswold,<sup>1</sup> but an unnamed traveler on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem.

Most everybody knows story of the Good Samaritan. Even if you didn’t grow-up hearing about it in church, the story is so familiar it has become part of our cultural lexicon. When a stranger stops to help someone

in need, we call that person a Good Samaritan. One of the most popular charities in the world is Samaritan's Purse, and there is even a travel club that was started in 1966 with the intention of making travel safer and less expensive. That club's name? The Good Sam Club.<sup>2</sup>

Though one of the most oft read passages of scripture, we still hear in its familiar verse, the comfort and challenge of the gospel. It challenges us first, to see *all* people as our neighbors and second, to help those neighbors when they are in need.

Jesus describes a wounded traveler and two people who pass him by; people who really should have stopped to help but who didn't. There was the priest and the Levite. Were they headed to Jerusalem for their respective duties in the temple? If so, stopping to investigate a body by the side of the road might have interfered with that duty. Because if the person turned out to be dead, touching them would have made the priest and the Levite ritually unclean and thus unfit to do their appointed temple duties.

The Samaritan gives no thought to such concerns. While the priest and the Levite may have had a good excuse, Jesus seems to be saying that the greatest service to God is not found in religious rituals but in loving-kindness shown to our neighbors.

Which is the other challenging notion in this story. "Who is my neighbor?", the lawyer asks. He seems to be trying to whittle down the long list of people he is expected to love. Surely not those guys, right? It's a question that echoes down through the ages and reverberates in our own time: Do we have to love the Muslims? Immigrants? Liberals? Conservatives?

Jesus ignores the question. Rather than answering, "*Who* is my neighbor," Jesus describes what a good neighbor *does*. For Jesus, the lawyer's question is moot; it has no meaning because *everyone* is your neighbor. It is pointless trying to delineate the boundaries between the insiders and outsiders because *that* distinction doesn't exist. *Everyone* has value. *Everyone* is your neighbor.

God's command to love isn't about *who* you're supposed to love. It's about *how* your supposed to love.

And in today's culture where we seem more than willing to not only define ourselves by our beliefs, but to disengage from those who hold competing beliefs, and to celebrate the failings of those we don't like, that command to make ourselves available to help and care *for everyone*; to act kindly and compassionately toward even the people we find most reprehensible, remains especially relevant.

Therein lies the challenge of the Good Samaritan. And now the other side of the page...

When we hear this story, we tend to focus on the person who helped. We put ourselves in the place of the Samaritan. Would we have stopped if we were in his shoes? Would we have helped as much as he did? But the traveler is usually an afterthought. How did he come to be there in that particular part of the country? How had he come to be beaten and left for dead? Who was it that attacked and robbed him? Had this been a news report, those might have been worthwhile questions to ask. But since this is just a parable made up on the spot by Jesus to make a point about who is our neighbor and what qualifies as love for them, those kinds of details aren't fleshed out.

It is worth pointing out that Jesus places the events of this story along the road to Jericho. The New Interpreter's Bible Dictionary tells us that the topography of this region makes the road to Jericho a "dangerous" one "with abundant opportunity for brigands to ambush travelers."<sup>3</sup>

We have always seen the traveler as merely an object to receive the Samaritan's mercy. But what if Jesus sets his story along the Jericho Road on purpose; to show that love and mercy are extended even to those who are less than sympathetic characters? Caring for victims is easy. But what about those who have brought their downfall on themselves?

Famous Bible commentator William Barclay makes that exact point. About the traveler Barclay writes:

*"He was obviously a reckless and foolhardy character. People seldom attempted the Jerusalem to Jericho road alone if they were carrying goods or valuables. Seeking safety in numbers, they travelled in convoys or caravans. This man had no one but himself to blame for the plight in which he found himself."<sup>4</sup>*

Wow. But how many times have you found yourself in a tight spot of your own making? How many times have you wished there was a way out, but knew there probably wasn't because you had done it to yourself? Think about the ways we hurt ourselves. Credit card debt is very common in this country. And you don't have to go far to find someone who is homeless or hungry or in need of a job, often because of their own mistakes and poor choices. Our nation currently finds itself in a crisis over immigration and we are told that we should feel no sympathy for families torn apart because they have entered the country illegally. Today we pray for 12 boys and their coach who are trapped in a cave they probably shouldn't have entered. Our choices sometimes lead to devastating consequences.

And yet Jesus' Samaritan never asks, "How did you get this way?" The circumstances that put the traveler in need are unimportant. It is only the need that matters. Which is consistently how Jesus rolls. The 5000 who gather to hear Jesus teach, should have known to make provision for themselves. If they are hungry, it is their own fault. Yet Jesus commands the disciples "You give them something to eat." The two criminals crucified on either side of Jesus are there for a reason. And yet Jesus tells the one who cried out to him for mercy "Today you will be with me in paradise." When Jesus heals, when he forgives, when he invites, he never asks for a resume; he never checks for a rap sheet.

Jim Richardson, the senior pastor for whom I worked back in Clemson always tells his children two things before they leave the house, even now as adults: "Remember that I love you. And don't do anything dumb." And it has always been understood that failing to abide by the second, does not negate the first.

It is the same with God. There is nothing we can do, no choice we can make, no mistake we can face, that will separate us from the Grace, mercy, and steadfast love of God.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hughes, John. *National Lampoon's Vacation*. Performance by Chevy Chase, and Beverly D'Angelo, Warner Brothers, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> "Good Sam Club." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 7 July 2018, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good\_Sam\_Club.

<sup>3</sup> Levine, Ely. "Jericho." *The New Interpreter's Bible Dictionary, Volume 3, I-Ma*, Edited by Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, Abingdon Press, 2008, p. 237.

<sup>4</sup> "Who Is My Neighbor?" *The Gospel of Luke*, by William Barclay, Westminster Press, 1975, p. 139. The Daily Study Bible Series, Revised Edition.