

## **“Straight Talk from the Michelin Man”**

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Luke 10: 25-37

If you don't think God has a sense of humor, just wait till you hear this story. This past week, while I was working on this sermon one morning, Charlotte came in and said that Norma Henderson, who was down at the desk, had called up and said there was a man down there who needed help. I started to say, “Why don't you send him on up?” but then I remembered that we had gotten a threatening note here at the church last week. There's some guy, evidently, who walks around in the downtown area and leaves notes like this at City Hall, and, understandably, we were concerned about the safety of the children in the Child Development Center, so Norma was not letting the man in. I had to go down and meet him at the east entrance. When Charlotte came to see me, if the truth be known, what I really wanted to say was, “I'm working on a sermon about helping people. Don't interrupt me to help someone!”

I went downstairs, and the man was waiting outside. I went out to visit with him and we visited for quite a while, so long in fact that he said he was thirsty. I think he'd had a rough night the night before and had a dry mouth. I went inside and got him a plastic cup with some ice and some water, took it back out and then started to ask him what was going on with him. He needed some help. In some ways, his story was not that different from stories we hear all the time. He was trying to get a bus ticket. The bus ticket cost \$14.00; he said he had \$9.00. The easy thing to do would have been to give him the \$5.00 and send him on his way, but I wanted to find out more about him.

I think we need to be good stewards of the money that God shares with us, whether it's our personal money or the money here at the church. I wasn't sure how much the man needed this money. It turned out that he had quite a story. He had come here from Houston, but he lived in Charlotte. He was on his way, he said, to Bartlesville. He needed a bus ticket to Bartlesville. I'm not real good at geography, but I know to get from here to Charlotte you don't need to go through Bartlesville, so I asked him about this. He said he was thinking about going to Illinois. I said, “Why are you going to Illinois?” He wasn't sure. He did tell me, interestingly enough, that he had a bank account at Wachovia Bank in Charlotte. He had several hun-

dred dollars in his bank account, and he was going to be getting a couple of more checks.

The man's name was Lester. I said, "Lester, I might have this wrong, but it sounds to me like you're on the 'See the USA with Whoever Will Pay' plan. Is that right?" He kind of laughed and said, "You know, I think you're right." I said, "I think you'd better go to Charlotte and get some money out of that bank." I didn't give him the \$5.00.

I've thought about whether or not that was the right thing to do. I'm still not sure. I do know this. This scripture today is an important one for us. It's the lectionary reading today, but more importantly than that, did you notice the words "eternal life" in the scripture? Any time you're reading the Bible and you come across the words "eternal life," you might want to pay attention. It's probably pretty important. The scripture is about the twin commands and the lawyer; he wasn't really a lawyer any more than I'm a physician - I have "Dr." in front of my name, but that doesn't mean I'm a physician; this man was a scribe, a keeper of the law. He was not an attorney.

He was testing Jesus, Luke said, when he asked the question about eternal life. Jesus turned it right back to the scribe and said, "How do you read?" The scribe knew about the twin commandments to love God and love neighbor, and Jesus said, "You've answered correctly. Do this and you will live."

Do you see what happened next? Desiring to justify himself, Luke says, like a little child in class who raises her hand, "Teacher, I know the answer! I know the answer." Desiring to justify himself, the scribe says, "And who is my neighbor?"

Before you hear anything else, you need to understand this. This is not a story about stopping to help someone change a flat tire. It is a story, however, about stopping and maybe about how we need to change. It deals with the very stuff of life. I have a sermon preparation book that I use every week. It's something I've developed myself through the years. It's something like a spiral notebook. I write down about 20 different things that are kind of markers for the sermon. One of the things I write down is the word "Michelin." In other words, what does this sermon say to us about the stuff of life, where the rubber meets the road? And so the Michelin Man speaks to us.

Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan when the scribe asked the question "Who is my neighbor?" But you need to understand this about the parable. Jews and Samaritans hated each other more than we can imagine, but maybe this will help. Imagine Jesus addressing a convention of the NAACP. He tells this story, and Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton are the men

who pass by the man who needs help, and the one who stops to help is the Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. That's how serious this was.

This is another example. Jesus is addressing an OU pep rally, imagine that. After he tells them it would be a good idea to stop cheating and not go on probation any more, he tells this parable. In the parable Bob Stoops and David Boren are the ones who don't stop, and Boone Pickens is the one who does stop to help.

If Jesus went to a seminary and addressed the students, in the parable it would be the president of the seminary and the dean who pass by, and it would be an uneducated lay minister who stops to help. If he were to address a joint session of Congress, it would be President Bush and Speaker Pelosi who pass by and Osama bin Laden who stops to help. That's how serious it was.

There is a message here for us about what's most important in life. It has something to do with our value system. I read a wonderful poem this last week. It goes something like this:

“He possessed all the world had to offer.  
He had reached every coveted goal,  
But, alas, his life was a failure,  
For he had forgotten his soul.”

At first glance, this parable doesn't appear to be a religious parable. It's similar to the parable of the sheep and the goats. You remember that story – it's not how you pray or how often you read the Bible or go to worship, it's what you do to help the least of these, to be kind. In both parables there is nothing overtly religious, but if you read between the lines, Jesus seems to be saying, “The way we care for each other opens our hearts to receive God's care for us.”

This parable is a warning for the church. One of the challenges that the church has faced from the very beginning is the disconnect with what we say on Sunday morning and how we live during the week. Jesus says it does matter. There is a connection between our faith and how we live. We could argue all day about whether the essence of Christianity is in being or doing, but while we argue, there are people like the man in this story who are half dead. Did you notice that? That's an interesting phrase, isn't it? I'm suggesting this morning that you know people who are half dead. They may look fully alive, but they are half dead because they have no relationship with Christ.

I met several of those people last Sunday afternoon. If you were here last Sunday, you will remember that I told you that I was going down to

conduct a funeral service for Booker, the name I gave to the man who was a bookie. It did not surprise me that that service was not in a church, because Booker had had nothing to do with the church. We met in an old Luby's Cafeteria that is empty now. That space is rented out for receptions and other kinds of meetings. When I walked into the room, there were probably close to as many people as are here this morning, but there was enough food for three times as many people. All around the edge of this room, there were tables set up with sandwich meat and other kinds of snacks. There were ice chests. In the ice chests there was pop and water bottles and beer. On one table that was set up there was some Jack Daniels and some Crown Royal. I'd never been to that kind of funeral before!

What I discovered was this, however. Booker's friends, people similar to Booker, when I said the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, and when I read that scripture from John 14 about "In my father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am there you may be also. I will not leave you comfortless. I will come to you. Because I live, you shall live also." As I said those words, I could tell that these half-dead people had never heard them before in their lives, that they were hungry to hear them.

As I prepared for this sermon this past week, even though I've preached on this parable many times before, I learned something new, which often happens. I was reminded of the role of Samaritans in the life of Jesus. You will remember one encounter in John 4, the encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well who was a Samaritan. Remember, she said to Jesus, "Why are you talking to me? Jews have no dealings with Samaritans." You might not remember another account in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus was getting ready to send out the seventy, but he said "Don't go to the Gentiles, or don't enter the village of a Samaritan."

Then in the chapter just preceding today's scripture, the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, we read that account of the turning point in Luke's gospel. Luke says that Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem. In other words, he had decided to go to Jerusalem to the cross. He set his face. Nothing would deter him, nothing would distract him.

Jesus and the disciples were about to enter a Samaritan village, but the Samaritans rejected them. As they left, James and John, the sons of Boanerges, the Sons of Thunder, said to Jesus, "Do you want us to pray to God to rain fire down on this village and destroy them?" You might remember that, but unless you read closely, you might not have read, down at the bottom of the page, the footnotes. In the footnote it says:

“Some versions add this: ‘When James and John asked the question, Jesus replied with these words, “You don’t know what manner of Spirit you are of. I came not to destroy men’s lives but to save them.”””

Do you see this change, even from Jesus? In his own life, he goes from not entering the village of a Samaritan to dying on a cross for Samaritans.

There is this other important lesson from the parable. Jesus asked the scribe, “Who was the neighbor to the man who needed help?” and the scribe replies, almost reluctantly it seems, “Well, I suppose it was the one who showed him mercy.” The one who was merciful. The one who stopped.

Who is it in your life who needs you to stop? It’s probably not someone by the side of the road with a flat tire. You can do that; there’s nothing wrong with that. But it might be someone in your own family. It might be your spouse who needs you to stop. It might be an older parent or a child. It might be a neighbor or a co-worker. Who needs you to stop for them?

Jesus Christ is the Michelin Man. Whenever he speaks to us, he speaks to us of those things that matter the most. He speaks to us about those things where the rubber meets the road, the very stuff of life. He says to us that, somehow, when we open our hearts to care for each other, we open our hearts to receive God’s care, and he says this: “Death does not have the last word.” Whether it’s half dead or fully dead, death does not have the last word, because when Jesus stopped for us, he stopped for us at the cross. Now he expects us to stop for each other. Amen.