

**There But for the Grace of God**  
(4<sup>th</sup> sermon in the series “Disciples Care”)

Luke 10: 25-37

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First Federated Church

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***Sermon Notes***

This program year we are exploring what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Each month we’ve highlighted one aspect of what it means to take Jesus seriously in our daily lives. This month we are looking at the *caring*; “Disciples Care.”

Listen again to today’s Gospel lesson. This time I will read from a different translation that familiar story commonly called “The Good Samaritan.” Listen carefully because there will be quiz at the end of the reading.

**Just then a religion scholar stood up with a question to test Jesus. “Teacher, what do I need to do to get eternal life?”**

**He answered, “What’s written in God’s Law? How do you interpret it?”**

**He said, “That you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence—and that you love your neighbor as well as you do yourself.”**

**“Good answer!” said Jesus. “Do it and you’ll live.”**

**Looking for a loophole, he asked, “And just how would you define ‘neighbor’?”**

**Jesus answered by telling a story. “There was once a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. On the way he was attacked by robbers. They took his clothes, beat him up, and went off leaving him half-dead. Luckily, a priest was on his way down the same road, but when he saw him he angled across to the other side. Then a Levite religious man showed up; he also avoided the injured man.”**

**“A Samaritan traveling the road came on him. When he saw the man’s condition, his heart went out to him. He gave him first aid, disinfecting and bandaging his wounds. Then he lifted him onto his donkey, led him to an inn, and made him comfortable. In the morning he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take good care of him. If it costs any more, put it on my bill—I’ll pay you on my way back.’”**

**“What do you think? Which of the three became a neighbor to the man attacked by robbers?”**

**“The one who treated him kindly,” the religion scholar responded.**

**Jesus said, “Go and do the same.”**

The quiz; “With whom did you identify?”

More times that I like to admit, I am like the priest or the Levite, for they represent those who “should have known better” but didn’t do the right thing—at least the right thing in the eyes of God.

Like the priest and the Levite, too often I am in a hurry, with my own agenda, my own list of things to do, I don't want to be bothered by other things. In other words, the priest and Levite became so self-focused on what they wanted to do, on where they were going that they didn't want the interruption. But you know something, much of life happens during the so-called "interruptions." Sometimes we have to slow down and do the right or kind thing.

I was reminded of this a couple of days after the recent fire at Thomas Jefferson Elementary School. As you may recall, the fire was discovered during our 9 o'clock hour. School was cancelled the next day, Monday, so that District 150 staff could prepare the mothballed "Loucks" school and transformed it into "Thomas Jefferson Elementary School in Exile."

On Tuesday morning, their first day in a new building, as I was getting ready to leave home my wife asked if I planned to do anything for Thomas Jefferson that day. I replied quite honestly that I hadn't given it a thought. My "dance card" for the day was already full! She suggested, though, that it might be a good idea to stop by and pick up some donuts to take to the staff. I muttered something with a sigh and thought to myself that if I was going to get donuts I might as well go out of my way a little bit and pick up some *Krispy Kreme* donuts. Wouldn't you know it, their bakers hadn't come that day in so all they had were day olds, *and they were not going to give me price break!*

So I drove over to *Dunkin Donuts* and bought five dozen glazed donuts. I pulled into the Thomas Jefferson parking lot shortly before 7:30 and was surprised to see District 150 personnel directing traffic. They stopped me to ask what my business might be. When I told them who I was and that I was from First Federated Church *and* that I had donuts for the staff, well, I had some sense of how Moses must have felt when he saw the waters of the Red Sea part! They directed me to a parking place by the door. As I walked in with the boxes of donuts I was met by the school's principal. You would have thought that I was bringing in gold, and in some ways I was. I was doing the work of Christ on behalf of First Federated Church. In those five dozen donuts I was showing that on their "new" first day of school that they were not alone, that someone cared for them.

The priest and the Levite could have suffered from what I call "compassion fatigue." Mothers or care-givers develop this affliction often. I'm prone to it, too. It often seems as if everyone wants a piece of you, that everyone wants something, and you give and give and give until you are given out! What has really happened is that we have not taken the time to make deposits into our emotional, physical and spiritual banks.

Steven Covey in his now classic book, 7 Habits of Highly Effective People says that we are so busy cutting down trees that we neglect to take time to sharpen our emotional-spiritual saw. Before long we grow dull and ineffective.

Have you ever noticed that when you fly and they are going through the preflight safety speech, the airline attendants tell you that if you are flying with a child and the oxygen masks drop from the ceiling, you are instructed to put your own mask on first before you put one on your child? Did you ever wonder why they say that? It is because if you don't take care of yourself, if you "black out," there will be no one to help your child. It is not an act of selfishness. It is an act of common sense. If you want to take care of someone else, you'd better take care of yourself, first. Otherwise, you'll run dry.

It could be that life had just made the priest and the Levite jaded. This can easily happen to pastors, physicians, nurses, counselors and the like. We've heard so many

things that nothing anyone can say is capable of shocking us or surprising us; we've seen so many things that we've grown numb. Maybe the priest and the Levite were numb.

Whatever the reason, neither could claim ignorance because they willfully crossed to the other side in order to avoid the wounded man lying on the side of the road.

I also identified with the naked man by the side of the road. There have been times in my life when I have been deeply wounded and afraid. One was when I was in a strange city and suddenly became quite ill. I walked to the nearest hospital which was about six blocks away—which was a good sign, being able to walk to the hospital, that is! I remember that I just wanted someone to help me. When I was released I was so filled with joy that when I was stopped by a pan handler I freely gave him some money. Since then I've carried what I call a "Jesus dollar" in my pocket for such an occasion.

When we are in trouble, when we are in need, when we need help, we don't really care who helps us, we just want someone to help us! And if that man on the side of the road was conscious of what was going on around him, I can imagine the great fear that would have swept through him as he saw the priest and the Levite cross over to the other side of the road.

If I'm truly honest with myself, too few times have I been the Samaritan, the hero of the story.

Like the priest and the Levite he, too, was a busy man. He was on a business trip. He didn't ignore or dismiss the man by saying to himself something like, "Hate to be you," or "Tough luck" or "I'm sure someone else will come along, someone who is more qualified than me, someone who can help him." He didn't ease his conscience by saying a little prayer for the man; "Lord, please send someone to help that man lying on the side of the road." He did none of these things. Instead, he put his faith into action.

The Epistle of James is a very simple, practical and challenging little letter. If I were to tell someone that if they could read only one thing on Christianity, I think that I would refer them to James. In his letter he writes, *Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves... What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has not works, is dead. (1:22; 2: 14-17)*

Seeing that man on the side of the road the Samaritan was moved, his heart went out to him. I imagine in my mind's eye that he whispered to himself, "There but for the grace of God goes I."

You see, he didn't care if the man was Greek or Jew, black, white, red, yellow or blue.

Nor did he blame the victim, as we so often do; "What in the world was he doing traveling alone on such a dangerous highway alone?" ... "He was just asking for it." ... "He shouldn't have been there, in that neighborhood at that time of night." ... "What did he think would happen?"

No, he saw not a stranger but a fellow human being, a fellow child of God who needed help.

Earlier in Luke's gospel Jesus gave his disciples a principle for living, a thing that we call "The Golden Rule." "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." (6:31) Here we see it put into action. "What would I want someone to do if *I* were in that situation?"

**The first thing that the Samaritan did was touch the man.** He treated him as a man. He applied basic first aid.

**Then he committed to the man.** He put him on his animal and took him to an inn—the closest thing that they would have had to a medical facility. He said to the innkeeper, "I want you to take care of him until I get back."

**And then comes what is perhaps the most amazing thing in the whole story, the Samaritan opened his purse.** He took out two denarii, roughly two days wages. "Here, take this," he said to the innkeeper. "If you spend any more than this, I will cover it."

Do you have any idea what he just did? He wrote the innkeeper a blank check!

"Which of the three," Jesus asked in answer to the original question, "was a *neighbor* to the man on the side of the road?"

"The one who showed him mercy, who treated him kindly," came the reply.

"Go and do likewise," Jesus said.

It's a nice story, but it is not real, it's not practical, it's not prudent we are tempted to say. Or is it all of those things, if we are to take Jesus seriously.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote that there is only one way to understand Jesus' words; through "simple surrender and obedience—not interpreting or applying it, but doing and obeying it. That is the only way to hear his words. He does not mean for us to discuss it as an ideal. He really means for us to get on with it."

Sometimes the word comes alive in the most unexpected places and through the most unexpected circumstances, but that is, more often than not, the way God gets our attention.

A few months ago, over lunch, a retired businessman who has since completed this part of life, told me about one of the most important men in his life. Fifty or so years ago when the man was starting his business he rented space on Southwest Adams from Jerome Ullman, another business who has been gone for many, many years. At one time he was president of the Temple.

One day Jerome walked into the young businessman's office and handed him an envelope. "If you ever need this," Jerome said, "use it." He walked out. A few minutes later the young businessman gathered up the courage to see what was inside the envelope and to his amazement he found a signed blank check!

I stopped by to see one of Jerome's sons to share that story about his dad with him. It is the kind of story that we like to hear about our dads. He was quite appreciative.

The spirit of the Samaritan is still alive. It is alive in every act of kindness, in every act of caring, in every act of generosity.

It seeks to be born in every human heart, but especially in the hearts of those who dare to call themselves disciples.

"Disciples care," to the glory of God. Amen.