

3 July 2016

The Merciful Muslim

Luke 10:25-37

A salesman went to Detroit. He represented a company that made caskets and embalming supplies for funeral homes, which was more interesting than you might think. Everyone needs those services sometime, so his visits took him all over: to upscale neighborhoods, small towns, and inner city slums – wherever there was a funeral home. He worked with people of every color, language, and background. This day, a Friday, his last stop was at a funeral parlor in inner city Detroit. It was a rough area, where even the police didn't go without backup, but the funeral business was booming. This day, though, he couldn't get to the home. Some sort of large conference at the big Catholic Church downtown had closed several streets. He had to park three blocks away and walk to the funeral home.

On the second block he got mugged. A teenage gang surrounded him and forced him into an alley, where they took his wallet and his sample case. Then one said he liked the salesman's overcoat and took that, too, making the salesman put on his own old, stained ski jacket. Then they took his shoes, but when they told the salesman to take off his pants, he tried to run. One jittery youth lashed out with his knife. The salesman sank to his knees, clutching his stomach, while the teens ran away, but he managed to crawl out of the alley to the main road before collapsing in a heap on the sidewalk.

A few minutes later, a Methodist clergyman came down that sidewalk. This wasn't just any clergyman, though. He was a Full Elder – which is already *very* important – and served on the General Board of Church and Society. He had just been to a wonderful conference at St. Aloysius Catholic Church – the Faith-Justice Expo 2016 – and his mind was filled with the inspiring words and challenging proposals he had heard that day. He had been to a breakout session on ecumenical responses to LGBTQI hate crimes, and he was excited about a new plan for a designated Sunday in the fall when United Methodist clergy from all over the US would simultaneously perform same-sex weddings in direct opposition to the *Book of Discipline*. They already had more than a hundred clergy willing to take part in this act of civil disobedience. The only hold-up was locating that many same-sex couples who wanted to be married by Methodists. Then there was a session on the new momentum that gun control legislation might be getting after the most recent mass shooting. The clergyman began composing a letter to the editor of his local newspaper as he walked, a letter that would persuasively lay out all the reasons that there had to be restrictions on certain kinds of weapons. As he walked, his attention was caught by an overflowing trash can, and it struck him that there weren't any designated receptacles for paper or plastic recycling. A brilliant idea came to him, where suburban churches could sponsor recycling bins in inner city neighborhoods, and he pulled out his iPhone to jot down the idea before it slipped away, and he almost tripped over a man in a dirty ski jacket lying in the sidewalk. The clergyman muttered a quick "Excuse me" and side-stepped just in time to avoid trampling the sleeping man. Then he looked back at his iPhone to finish his note as he walked on.

A few minutes later, along came another clergyman who had attended the conference – another United Methodist, in fact, although he had gone for a different reason. This one, also a

Full Elder – and thus also very important – had gone as a representative of the Confessing Movement of United Methodists. That’s the evangelical group that declares their intention to return Methodism to biblical principles, such as the biblical view of marriage as between one man and one woman, the rejection of modernism and return to scripture as the ultimate authority in all matters, and the restoration of strong personal morality in the life of the church. This particular clergyman in fact had been sent to attend the conference by the *Good News Magazine*, the most important publication of traditional evangelical Methodists, so that he could write a report on what the liberal wing of the denomination was doing.

He had been disturbed by what he had heard at the Faith-Justice Expo, and as he walked he was composing his article in his head. He would describe how the liberals at the meeting had casually disregarded both the clear injunctions of scripture and, at least in the case of United Methodists, the direct instructions of their own *Book of Discipline*. He began to wax eloquent in his mind, as he described the steep descent into immorality that was coming if the liberals had their way. They had been completely assimilated by the permissive culture of tolerance and anything-goes self-gratification that afflicted America as a whole. Where the church should be standing *against* culture, it was in danger of being absorbed *by* the culture. He stopped to write down that sentence before he forgot it.

Ahead of him, he saw a man in a filthy jacket sprawled across the sidewalk, and he looked up at him sadly. What do you expect in a culture where whatever “feels good” is permitted? He didn’t know whether this man was simply drunk or on heroin, but either way, he perfectly demonstrated the consequences of America’s decline into post-modernism and moral chaos. Shaking his head mournfully, he stepped around the man and walked on.

Three blocks away, a young Muslim college student got into his car. He had been to Friday prayers at the mosque. Prayers had finished a couple of hours earlier, but some sort of convention at the big Christian church down the road had clogged traffic and blocked off streets, so he had just gone inside to pray quietly until the roads were clear. Finally it looked as if he could get home, so he got into his car and pulled into traffic. A minute later, though, he saw from the corner of his eye a shapeless bundle on the sidewalk. It was a man. The student pulled up to the curb and looked around warily.

He had to be careful. Although he had been born there in Detroit, his parents were from Lebanon, and he still looked very Middle Eastern. In the current climate, people who looked like him just needed to be careful in unfamiliar neighborhoods. He had often been called “raghead” or “terrorist” by strangers, and once or twice had felt himself to be in danger, but the street was nearly empty, so he got out of his car and went to check on the man.

“Hello, sir? Are you all right?” It was a dumb question, he knew, but what else was he to say? The man didn’t answer, so the student knelt beside him. Only then did he see a dark stain on the sidewalk beneath the man’s stomach. It was blood. The student pulled out his phone and called 911 at once, giving the ambulance directions. Then he pulled the man’s arm back and rolled him over. The student was in his first year of medical school, and while he hadn’t done any of his clinicals, he did know CPR, if it were necessary. The wound in the man’s stomach began to bleed more freely, and the student quickly applied pressure. Blood covered his hands, but he held them in place until the flow lessened, and the paramedics arrived.

The student followed the ambulance to the ER, where he told the doctors there everything he knew, then waited in the waiting room, unsure what to do. After a while, one of the nurses came and told him that the man had carried no ID. Was he a friend?

“I’d never seen him before I found him,” the student said, “so no, I don’t know who he is. Is there . . . anything I can do?” The nurse said the man was in surgery now. The student nodded, then took a sheet of paper and wrote down his name and contact information. “Look, until you find out who he is and find his family, I can be his contact. When he’s out of surgery, could you call me? I’ll be back to see him tomorrow, but call anytime, even in the middle of the night if you need anything, all right?”

We read from Luke 10:25-37:

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ 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 neighbour as yourself.’ And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’ 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. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 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. 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.” Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

As I started this summer of considering Jesus’ parables, I said that one of the problems we have with them is that they are just *so* familiar. It’s hard for us hear them as Jesus’ intended. In fact, in today’s parable, we generally hear it exactly opposite from the way Jesus’ meant. We think of the Temple priests of that time as self-serving hypocrites, so when he describes the priest passing by the injured man, we just nod. What else would you expect? But to Jesus’ audience, the Pharisees were the religious elite, the most committed, most spiritual, most admired religious leaders of all. In the same way, the word “Samaritan” for us means “generous and merciful person.” We have charities and hospitals that have “Samaritan” in their name, because everyone knows that Samaritans are kind and compassionate. But to Jesus’ original audience, Samaritans were unclean heretics who claimed to worship the same God, but who used different scriptures and went to a different place of worship. They were not just Gentiles; they were evil Gentiles who had perverted the true faith. Samaritans were more hated than anyone.

So when Jesus told this story where a priest and a Levite left a man to die, but a Samaritan saved his life, it was shocking. People who heard it were offended. And perhaps some

of you were offended by way I retold the story. If so, that means you heard it the way you were supposed to. Jesus ended his parable with a question, so let me do the same. Remember the two Methodist clergymen – both of them Full Elders and therefore, remember, very important – and then remember the Muslim student. Which one of them was like Christ? Go and be like that.