

Not My Problem,

17 April 2005

Bible passage: **Luke 10:30-37** (*The Message*)

Jesus was asked to define a 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."

You may have heard about something that happened in New York City a number of years ago. A young woman named Kitty Genovese was brutally murdered in a New York residential area while at least 38 people watched from their windows. The woman screamed for help, and many heard her, but no one tried to help, and no one called the police during the course of the ½ hour ordeal.

Interviews were conducted with those who witnessed the crime, and most of the thirty-eight witnesses said that they just didn't want to get involved. They didn't want it to become their problem, and because they didn't do anything to help, a person died.

This theme for this service was actually prompted by a song by Martina McBride entitled "Concrete Angel." The song is about a young girl who's being abused, but no one acts on her behalf, even though others notice what's going on. One of the lines from the song says, "Somebody cries in the middle of the night. The neighbors hear, but they turn out the light." To me, that sounds like the story of Kitty Genovese...her anguish is heard, but not one person acts to help.

The story of the young woman in New York is similar to the story Jesus tells a religious scholar who understands that one of the primary commandments says that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, but he tries to pick the whole concept apart by asking Jesus to tell him just who he is to call his neighbor.

Now the Bible passage we have for today is often referred to as the Good Samaritan story. In

essence, it is this: there was a man traveling alone on a very dangerous stretch of road between Jerusalem and Jericho, and he was attacked by robbers. They took all of his belongings, beat him up and left him for dead.

Two travelers, both religious men, walk by the man, and they do nothing to help him. We can only guess the reasons. Perhaps they were hurrying to make a destination, and feared that helping the man would slow him down. Maybe they were afraid that the injured man was a decoy and that the robbers would attack him, so they passed him by.

The third man was a Samaritan, one who was generally considered an outcast and an outsider by the society of the day. On the surface, he would appear to be the one least likely to help, since he had probably received few kindnesses from others. However, the Samaritan went to great lengths to care for the man and help him recover from his injuries.

After Jesus told the story, he asked the scholar which one of the three became a neighbor to the man who was robbed, and the scholar replied that it was the one who treated him so kindly. To his response, Jesus simply said, "**Go and do the same.**"

As people of faith, we're to live our lives with that kind of loving action. However, it's clear from the Kitty Genovese situation that that is not always the way we live. Perhaps we would expect that kind of thing in New York City and with just ordinary people, but surely people of faith wouldn't ignore the pleas of someone in need.

An experiment was conducted with some seminary students who had just completed reading the Bible story we have for today—the Good Samaritan story. The students were told that they were to give a talk on the Bible story, and they had to walk to a nearby building to present their talk. Along the way, each student ran into a man slumped in an alley, head down, eyes closed, coughing and groaning, and they were observed by researchers to see how many would stop to help.

There was one more variable of the experiment—some students were told that they were late, so they had to hurry to the next building, while others were given plenty of time to move to the next site. According to the reports of the study, the only thing that really appeared to be a factor in who stopped and who didn't was whether or not the student was in a hurry. Of the group told they were late, only 10% stopped to help, but 63% of those who had time to spare stopped. Faith didn't seem to matter; only the element of time played a role.

I'm sorry for that, because I think faith *should* make a difference in how we live our lives. All the faith statements in the world aren't worth the time it takes to say them if they're not accompanied by caring action. Real compassion must be evidenced by the deeds we do.

I wonder how many of us see all that's going on around us. I mean, *really* see? I suspect most of us have seen those standing at the exit ramps on 465 with a sign that tells their need, but I wonder if we've done anything about it. I have to admit that I'm not always very proud of my response. Sometimes I pray for a green light so I won't have to stop. Perhaps we've just gone on by, forgetting about that person's plight as soon as we're past. Maybe we've turned away, feeling slightly uncomfortable, or maybe we're a bit cynical about the whole thing. I wonder how many situations we see in our world, and choose to walk on by, saying in essence, "Not my problem."

Fortunately not everyone says that. You and I know folks who are actually doing something to challenge the spread of AIDS across the globe, or who are working with those being released

from prison. Recently, the Red Cross in Indianapolis honored 35 people for performing heroic deeds, doing things like saving a young boy from drowning, pulling a family from a burning house, and more. They helped.

On our flight out west last week, I read about a flight attendant on an airline who befriended a family flying from Amsterdam to Minnesota to get medical treatment for the 7-year-old son. Their flight was delayed and eventually diverted to another location. When they finally got to their destination, the flight attendant realized that the family didn't have transportation, so she invited them to her home and loaned them a car. In fact, the family wound up staying with her for nine months while the child received medical care. She was a Good Samaritan.

So was a man on a streetcar in San Francisco last Saturday. When the car got to the end of the line, everyone got off, and the man went onto the streetcar, and began sweeping out all the dirt and trash that had accumulated since the car had last been at that stop. He was a volunteer, a Good Samaritan, who cared enough to keep the streetcar clean for others.

Jesus said, **"Go and do the same."** But what if we haven't been doing that? What then? I guess my hope and prayer would be that we would look around us with new eyes, and really see what's going on in this world, whether that be child abuse, domestic violence, hunger, poverty, homelessness, AIDS, or something as simple and basic as getting rid of the trash that contaminates so much of our homes, our schools, our workplaces, our cities.

After we see with new eyes, we have to go; Go, and do what the Good Samaritan did. We can't just stand on the sidelines, or think it's not our problem. It *is* our problem! We are all part of the God's creation; we are interconnected, and it is our place to do something to alleviate suffering around us.

Recently, I had the opportunity to visit the church that a friend of my leads in the northern part of Indiana, and I was quite taken with some of the action that congregation is taking in its community. Some Sundays each year, they bring semi-loads of food into their parking lot, and then every person who is in attendance on that Sunday morning heads to those semis, helps unload the boxes of food, and then spends the day distributing the much-needed food to those in that community who are living below the poverty level. That food drop involves everyone in helping to feed the hungry.

There's another idea I got from our visit with him, and that was an idea that's going to get some legs on it in the year ahead. However, I really thought that today would be a good time for us to start, because it's a way for all of us to become Good Samaritans. It's giving the gift of 90 minutes of our time every 90 days to help someone in need. That doesn't sound like much, but just think what a huge difference it would make if every one of us here this morning did exactly that!

There are lots of opportunities to become a Good Samaritan. Take, for instance, any of our charitable contribution recipients. Each month we give 10% of our Sunday offerings to a different charitable organization in our community. The following month, a representative come to receive the check and the video that we prepare for them, and each time we see that video, it ends with a contact person or a phone number. I can't think of a one that couldn't use some of our people hours to help in their work, and that's always an option when we view that video every single month. How can we help there?

There are various work projects coming up that Gardeners can get involved with. For instance, in June and again in August, there will be opportunities to work on two different

projects in Appalachia; in October, there will be a work project in Florida to help repair hurricane damage. There's a trip to Chile coming up in late October and early November, and doctors and nurses are invited to to on the medical/humanitarian project to Haiti in late September. There are brochures on our information tables if any of you are interested in those opportunities to be a Good Samaritan.

Maybe we can't go far away from home, and want to do something to help right here in our community. I know that Norm Stuart is looking for a group of folks who would be willing to serve breakfast to those who otherwise wouldn't get a hot meal at Fletcher Place. He's looking for help on the second Friday of every month from 8-10:30. Who's up for helping there?

Someone stopped me in a grocery store recently, but frankly, I had forgotten about it until I read an article in the paper last Sunday that stirred my memory. The article was about something called "Princess Project," and it was about gathering dresses for needy young women to wear to their high school proms. None of them can afford to attend the event because they cannot afford the dresses they would have to wear to attend. The project collects old bridesmaids' gowns, old prom dresses, anything with glitter, sequins or lace that can be worn to the prom. We can do that, too. Some of us may have just those very things stuffed away in a closet, gathering dust, and some young woman could have a delightful, memorable high school event, if we just help.

It's impossible for me to name every need in our community, let alone in the world. However, I think the point is clear. That's what our lives are to be about, just as Elizabeth O'Connor said in her book *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*: **"Every single one of us has 'good work' to do in life. This good work not only accomplishes something needed in the world, but completes something in us."**

If our faith is real, and if we experience God's love in our lives, then we will see the world around us in a whole new way; we will care about one another, and our lives will be filled with loving action. I truly believe that's why each one of us is here—to love our neighbor, to help those in need, to care for one another, to be a Good Samaritan.

Leo Buscaglia once said, **"Each of our acts makes a statement as to our purpose."** What will our actions say about us?

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that our shoulder will be one for others to lean on, and that each us will live our lives like the Good Samaritan. Remember, Jesus said, "Go and do the same."

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.