

## BRINGING HOPE TO THE JERICHO ROAD

I Corinthians 9:16-18 and Matthew 22:34-40

It's always good to ask the right questions. Like the Pharisee lawyer whose conversation with Jesus we read in Matthew 22. The lawyer asks, "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" It's also good – when you ask the right question – to the right person – to listen to the answer AND follow-through. Listen to Jesus' answer – I know you've heard it before – but listen to it again: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and the greatest commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." That's Jesus answer to the right question. We don't know how that Pharisee lawyer followed-through, hopefully he did. What is important is for US to ask this question – hear Jesus' answer and then follow-through with love for God and love for neighbor.

Another Jewish lawyer asked a follow-up question – hopefully because he wanted to get about the business of loving neighbor. He asked, "And who is my neighbor?" And then, as we know, Jesus told a story about a Samaritan – throughout Christian history known as the "Good Samaritan" – who went where no man before him had gone – across the Jericho Road – to "bandage the wounds" of one robbed and stripped and beaten and left for dead – one whom others had passed by. This Samaritan – forever after known as "Good" – showed mercy to the one who was beaten and broken and bloodied because that one who was beaten and broken and bloodied was his neighbor. And Jesus concludes this little story with these words, "Go and do likewise."

Someone once said, "On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they journey on life's highway." The one who spoke those words was one of the true heroes of our faith, a man who was convicted as much as Paul himself that "If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel." This hero of our faith did proclaim the gospel, and he did so to "transform the Jericho Road". He proclaimed the gospel as a word from God that takes us beyond single acts of picking up the beaten man on the side of the road or putting a handing a dollar to the man at the highway intersection or dropping our pledge envelope in the offering bag. He proclaimed the gospel as a word from God which calls us to clean up the Jericho Roads- to work to rid our society of those things which cause women and men, girls and boys to fall beaten and broken and bloodied by the side of the road, or in the slums of our cities, or on the playgrounds of our schools, or in the crack houses of our neighborhoods. He proclaimed the gospel as a word from God which calls us to leave the comfort zones of our own homes and sanctuaries and go out into the streets of our communities – and out to every Jericho Road – every place where another of God's children is hurting – and care for the one who is hurting AND rid that road of whatever caused that one to be beaten down, robbed, oppressed. This hero of our faith, this one who proclaimed this word of God because God laid on him the obligation to do so, was Martin Luther King, Jr. In his final sermon, in Memphis, on the night

before his assassination, he described the realities of our nation – a nation in which we are challenged from the pulpit to go out and be good Samaritans – but not challenged from those same pulpits to go out and change our society in ways which will lessen the need for the Good Samaritan. How many times have you heard sermons – how many times have I preached sermons – which have applauded the actions of the Good Samaritan – challenging us all to “go and do likewise” and how many times have we heard sermons – have many times have I preached sermons – that challenge us to work to rid our city, our state, our nation, our world of those things that cause the need for the compassionate acts of a Good Samaritan? Why was the man robbed and beaten and left for dead by the side of the road? Why are people in our own city and state allowed to be robbed by predatory lending, and why are they forced to work for wages that cannot possibly provide them with even the basic necessities of life, and why are they forced to choose between food and medicine because they cannot afford both, and why are we willing – from time to time - to be a Good Samaritan – but too often – unwilling to do the things that will make a real change in the lives of the man – the men and women and children – robbed and beaten and left for dead along the Jericho Roads of our city and state and nation? Why – because we are willing to allow ourselves to feel good about those few coins we put in the Salvation Army Kettle and that giving that “bum” on the street our loose change and sending our small check to United Way – and that allows us to put on our blinders to the deeper needs – **and when we don’t “see” the needs we see no “need” to help.**

There is, I believe, a force in our nation which likes it that way. A force in our nation which prides itself in pointing out how we are different from others – because that causes divisions and as long as we are divided we cannot, will not work together to fix the problems along the Jericho Roads of our city, state and nation. There is something wrong on the Jericho Roads of our city and state and nation. There is something broken here. There are so many lying beaten and bloodied and broken on the side of the road. Yet we are told, “They’re not your people – pass them by.” We’re told, “you’re urban and they’re rural – pass them by”. We’re told, “you’ve got money and they don’t – pass them by”. We’re told, “you’re mature and they’re young, pass them by.” We’re told, “you’re Protestant and they’re Catholic, pass them by; you’re Christian and they’re Muslim, pass them by; you were born here and they weren’t, pass them by; you are white and they are black or Hispanic or Asian, pass them by; you’re heterosexual and they’re not, pass them by; you have health insurance and they don’t, pass them by; you have a job and they don’t, pass them by” and every time we listen to those dividing words – and allow ourselves to become “us” over against “them” – and when we do so we pass them by, on the other side of the road. We ignore their pain and we don’t have to do a blessed thing to work to alleviate that pain – and certainly we don’t have to do a blessed thing to alleviate the causes of the pain – because we need to hurry on to the next activity, the next meeting, the next party, the next fellowship event which involves only those who are “like us”. As long as we are pitted **against** the one on the side of the road, we will never take those few steps across the Jericho Road to really see their need – and we will never work to truly alleviate that need.

So today, I want to take our focus off the Good Samaritan – because as long as we focus on him we have this picture in our mind of a Samaritan who was different from the Jewish priest

and the Jewish rabbi who walked by and different from the Jewish man who was lying beaten and robbed and left for dead by the side of the Jericho Road. So take your focus OFF the Good Samaritan and focus on the man by the side of the Jericho Road. Focus on the man who is beaten and broken and bloodied by the side of the Jericho Road. Why is he there? Why was this stretch of road from Jerusalem to Jericho allowed to be such a dangerous place? Why did no one step up and do the work that needed to be done to make it a safe passage for those who travelled there? And why, why do we allow there to be so many Jericho Roads in our city and our state and our nation where men and women, girls and boys are left beaten and broken and bloodied while we travel the safe roads – not only avoiding those who are beaten and broken and bloodied – but avoiding all those places – all those situations in which those beatings and that brokenness and the bloodiness takes place?

Jim Wallis, author of *Faith Works* writes that “Faith-based charity provides crumbs from the table; faith-based justice offers a place at the table.” We are called to do justice as disciples of the one who told the parable of the beaten and broken and bloodied man. We are called to work for justice – not just charity which picks the man up and binds his wounds for the moment – but justice which obliterates the horrors that caused him to have those wounds.

There is a movement in our city and state right now – an ecumenical, interfaith, powerful, inspiring, Spirit-driven movement – which I believe is happening because women and men of faith are affirming the words of Paul to the Corinthians, that “an obligation has been laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!” And that “gospel” which is being proclaimed is not just a message of being a “Good Samaritan” – as important as that is, for we must refuse to pass by the one beaten and broken and bloodied by the side of the road. The gospel I hear being proclaimed by people of faith is a gospel which seeks to clean up every Jericho Road by loving our neighbors enough to work to change those laws that keep them beaten and broken and bloodied by the side of the road. And that takes more than a band-aid. That takes more than nodding our head when Jesus says, “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.’”. That takes more than being willing to say we are disciples of Jesus Christ. If we are truly disciples of Jesus who love our neighbors, then we will willingly, lovingly and constantly perform the “Good Samaritan acts” in the moment of real need in the lives of our neighbor AND we will willingly, lovingly and constantly work to change whatever it was that caused that need.

The Reverend Dr. Steve Long of Marceline, MO preached a sermon recently which he titled “The Jericho Roads of Missouri” in which he said, “Martin Luther King, Jr. ....said the reason religious folk passed by the man who had been beaten and robbed is because they asked the wrong question: ‘If I help this man, what will happen to me?’ The good man stopped to help because he asked the right question: ‘If I don’t help this man, what will happen to HIM?’”. Does that resonate with you? Do you believe that this second question is the right question? Do you believe that every person we see beaten and broken and bloodied along the highways of life is worth you asking, “If I don’t help this person, what will happen to HIM? To HER?”? And if so – if you believe that every human – every man, woman and child created in the image of God – is worth your time to stop and ask that question – do you also believe that that human –

created in the image of God is worth your effort to change the realities of the Jericho roads of our city and state and nation so that their lives are blessed in ways that ours are blessed?

What happens to people who are being robbed and beaten and broken and bloodied by the usury – condemned by our scriptures – of the Payday loan agencies and by laws allowing employers to enslave folks with wages that are impossible to survive on? What will people do who are doing their best to survive – but like the man on the Jericho Road find themselves robbed and beaten and broken and bloodied by practices our scriptures condemn? Do you and I care? Should we be surprised by the prevalence of crime, drugs, gangs, and shootings – by the homelessness in our own city – by the ever increasing number of real, “created in the image of God” people who walk through our doors desperately hungry? Desperate people who have no other resources resort to desperate means to survive – and will continue to do so until we make the Jericho Roads secure for them.

I give thanks to God for the many, many Good Samaritans in this congregation to walk across the Jericho Road to the one in need – volunteering at the Samaritan Center, providing meals at the Salvation Army, building homes with Habitat, teaching children on our K-Plus, - and binding up the wounds of others in so many ways. And I give thanks to God that our vision is constantly broadening as we work with other sisters and brothers in combating the structures that cause many to lie along the Jericho Road.

In the spirit of the prophets of old – Isaiah and Jeremiah and Amos and others -who called on the leaders of their nation to stand up for the oppressed, in the spirit of Paul who was obligated to preach the gospel, in the spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr. and other faith leaders who have sought to speak for and stand with and change laws for the marginalized and voiceless of our nation, I believe we are called by God to go beyond being the Good Samaritan. We are called to transform the Jericho Roads so that all may travel them knowing blessings beyond mere survival – knowing the blessings of the abundance of God.

As we receive the bread and cup today – from a table to which every beaten and broken and bloodied man, woman and child is invited by Jesus to dine along with us – may we be a people committed to being “Good Samaritans” AND also committed to paving the way that all might know the abundance we know, through Christ, our Lord.

Let’s pray..... Thank you, God, for Good Samaritans, and for the opportunities you give to us to be Good Samaritans. May we never pass them by. Give us also, O Lord, the courage to do the work needed to make life safer, more secure, more than survival for all your children. Amen.