

The story of the Good Samaritan, which we have just heard, is one of the most well-known stories in the Bible. It is a story that most of us have heard many times. Some of you probably even know the whole story by heart. Some of you might even have preconceived notions about what you might hear from a sermon on this familiar passage, but I hope you'll pay attention anyways. The familiarity with this story goes beyond church settings. Just the other night on the news a reporter used the term "Good Samaritan" to describe someone who helped a stranger in need. People just know what this story is about.

The plot of the story goes like this: A lawyer tests Jesus, asking what he must do to inherit eternal life, only to have Jesus respond with a question, "What is written in the law?" The lawyer responds by quoting the commandments to love God and love neighbor. Then the lawyer asks, "And who is my neighbor?", and Jesus responds by telling a story.

The story is about a man who is robbed and beaten along a road, and left half dead. Two men, a priest and a Levite, each come along the road and pass on the other side. Both were probably concerned about coming into contact with what looked like a dead body. To touch a dead body would make them unclean. Then a Samaritan came along the road. The Samaritan, who was an outsider, and probably an enemy to the man lying along the road, was moved with pity, and stopped to help. The point of the story is straightforward. The Samaritan was a neighbor to the man who had been robbed and beaten. Why? Because he showed mercy to someone in need.

Stories like this happen every day, both stories of people passing by, and stories of people stopping to show mercy. For example, you drive by a car stopped alongside of the road. You don't stop because you never know what people might do these days. Or maybe you *do* stop, because it is clear someone needs help, or maybe you just have a "gut" feeling that something is

wrong. Situations like this happen in other places too, not just along the road. These situations can happen along our sidewalks, in our schools, in our workplaces, on the beach, at the mall, or even in our homes.

Every day we face decisions as to whether or not we will show mercy to others. Sometimes the need is clear, and so is the way to meet the need. I think of the groups helping with Habitat for Humanity who are staying at our church, as well as the groups who serve the hungry at Supper House. In these cases there is an obvious need, and the way for people to show mercy is clear.

But I wonder about other less obvious stories, stories about people who are in need of mercy, but are harder to see, or maybe the way to show mercy is harder to see. I wonder about people like Mabel. Mabel lives in a nursing home, as she has for the past three years. Now her condition is such that Hospice is helping with her care. She spends her days sitting all alone in her wheelchair. She often sits by the window overlooking the courtyard. She enjoys the sunshine she says. The hours and the days pass by slowly for her. She has no one to talk to really. She goes to meals, and nurses take care of her, but other than that, she has no interaction with others. No one comes to visit Mabel. Her children have all moved far away, and now she spends her days alone in a nursing home.

Mabel was once a very prominent woman. She was an executive secretary for a corporation. She was in a position of great importance, and was proud of what she did. But now Mabel is alone, and as our gospel says, she has been left half dead.

There are probably countless people who pass by Mabel each day. But she doesn't even look up when people walk by. And really, why would a complete stranger stop and talk to her? And the people who walk by are thinking *surely* there must be someone who stops by to visit her. *Surely* this elderly woman sitting by the window is not *always* alone like that.

As a matter of fact, she is *not* always alone. She is visited by one person, someone she had never met before, a complete stranger to her. She is puzzled by this strange visitor who stops in to see her. He says he is with Hospice, and this is just part of what he does. He kneels by her wheelchair and talks to her, asks about her life. She tells him about herself, her family, her career, and her current situation, hoping he might just go away. But the stranger comes back again a few weeks later, and wants to know how she is doing. “What does he care?” she wonders. Her existence is meaningless. “Four stone walls do not a prison make,” she tells him one day. To her, living in the nursing home is like living in a prison from which she longs to be set free. Furthermore she just could not understand why this stranger came back to see her. But the visits continued. About once a month, this stranger stopped in to see Mabel. Who knows if that stranger’s visits ever made a difference, but he visited anyway. He showed mercy to a woman left half dead along the road.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a parable about showing mercy to *all* who are in need. I think often when we hear this parable we think about people literally stranded along the road. We also think about helping people who are poor, hungry, or homeless, people who are obviously in need. We think about showing mercy to people who are not like us – people of different race, culture, religion, or status. Yes, this parable is about all of the above. This is a parable about showing mercy to all who have been left half dead along the road, people who need a neighbor, people who need someone to stop and show mercy.

But this parable is also about being a neighbor to many other people who have been left half dead along the road perhaps unseen: The widow down the street who is grieving and has no one to talk to; the elderly man suffering from Alzheimer’s; the awkward teenager who is “different” from other kids her age; the young man who suffers from mental illness. There are people all around us who are in need of someone who will show mercy. Deep down I think we

all know how to show mercy. We know what it means to be a neighbor. But I think we sometimes overlook people around us who are in need of mercy in less visible ways.

When you think about it, at some point in time, we *all* are in need of a neighbor. We are *all* in need of someone to show mercy. If you have never experienced this, I am sure you will someday. At times we all end up being the one left half dead along the road. At times there will be people who pass by on the other side of the road, and we are left waiting. But then we are thankful for those who are moved to stop and show mercy.

And let's be honest, there is a cost to showing mercy. To show mercy is really to love, and love comes with a cost. It costs time, effort, pride, and energy. It also requires us to see people differently. It requires us to see every person we meet in the same way that we are seen by the one who loves us most – Jesus Christ. Through his life and ministry, Jesus teaches us what it means to show mercy. We find out what it means to love. When Jesus walked the earth he was always showing mercy, by healing the sick, and reaching out to the outcast. He entered into the suffering of others. He *loved* them. Jesus did not pass by on the other side of the road. Jesus did not leave people half dead. Jesus reached out in mercy, and he did not overlook anyone.

Jesus also endured pain, the pain of the cross. Jesus suffered and became one who needed mercy, but there was no one there. He was left alone to die as everyone else passed by on the other side of the road. On the cross, Jesus showed us the lengths to which he would go out of his love for us. But out of his suffering came new life, and the promise that we too will have new life, and this is the promise that frees us to “Go and do likewise.” This promise frees us to stop and show mercy to *everyone* in need, and to see *all* people through the eyes of faith.

At times the need is obvious, and at times it is not so obvious. But in all cases we are called to stop and show mercy, no matter the cost. To stop and show mercy as the Samaritan did

means entering into the suffering of others. To see others as Jesus sees us means entering into the suffering of others. But when we enter into the suffering of others, then we see what it truly means to *love*, and that is our call as followers of Christ – to go and do likewise.

Amen.