

## ***“The Meaning of Love”***

***Theme: Stories that Change the World***

***Scripture: Luke 10:25-37***

*Things I’d like to remember from today’s sermon:*

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*Meditation Moments for Monday, May 19 – Read 2 Kings 17:3-6, 24, 29-41 – The Assyrian Empire conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. To reduce the chance of rebellions, the Assyrians broke up groups of people and mixed in their own people with the Jewish people. These people were known as Samaritans. Instead of reaching out to these new neighbors in the North, the Jewish people of the South seem to have responded with condemnation and hostility towards the Samaritans as they began to worship God and practice their faith differently.*

- *2 Kings was written about 150 years after Assyria captured the North part of Israel. The disdain the book showed for the early Samaritans grew even worse after the return from exile (see Ezra 4:1-5, Nehemiah 4:1-9). Might the story have been different if people in the southern kingdom had welcomed their new neighbors, and sought to share God’s love with them? Were those who sowed distrust and hatred doing what God wanted, or not?*

- Scholar N. T. Wright wrote: “The hatred between Jews and Samaritans had gone on for hundreds of years—and is reflected, tragically, in the smoldering tension between Israel and Palestine today. Both sides claimed to be the true inheritors of the promises to Abraham and Moses, so both sides saw themselves as rightful owners of the land. Few Israelis today travel from Galilee to Jerusalem by the direct route, because it will take them through the West Bank and risk violence.” Since Jesus worked so hard to break down hatred between peoples, what had the Israelites not understood about their God?

*Prayer: Lord, even as your people, we fall into the human tendency to devalue anyone who is different from us. Help me more and more to live out your love for the whole world. Amen*

*Tuesday, May 20 – Read Luke 9:51-56 and John 4:7-9, 8:42-48 – Just knowing Jesus was going to Jerusalem led a Samaritan village to refuse to welcome him. When Jesus’ enemies wanted to call him a vile name, they came up with “Samaritan,” which for them was practically a synonym for “having a demon.”*

- *In Luke 9:55, James and John reacted to the Samaritans’ slight in very human fashion, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to consume them?” But Jesus refused. Have you ever been in a position either to build the flames of hatred higher, or to lower the temperature and move toward peace? Which course did you choose? How did things work out?*
- *You’ve probably never called anyone a “Samaritan,” unless you were praising them for being helpful. In your circles, what are some of the insulting names you could call someone else? What creates the kind of inner blindness in us that the Jewish leaders showed when they called Jesus a “Samaritan”? What can help you to see people through God’s eyes when you find insulting language for them coming to mind?*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, when Samaritans snubbed you, you refused the path of anger. When I’m hurt, my natural inclination is like the disciples’. It’s true that “hurt people, hurt people.” Transform my heart. Amen*

*Wednesday, May 21 – Read John 4:19-30 – The woman believed Jesus was a prophet, so she asked where people should worship—the mountain in Samaria or Jerusalem. This theological issue kept separation and prejudice alive between Samaritans and Jews. Jesus didn't focus on the place of worship, but on who we worship ("the Father") and in what spirit ("worship in spirit and truth"). The woman said she knew a Messiah would come. Jesus said, "I Am—the one who speaks with you." His disciples were shocked to find him talking with a woman, especially a Samaritan. The woman went to tell people what had happened and invite them to "come and see."*

- Jesus turned social expectations upside down and broke down the walls dividing people. He was Savior for all and made it clear that God is not bound to any one place or people. What walls separate you from others (socioeconomic level, education, race, religion, etc.)? How have you helped break through some of those walls in the past, and how can you do so now?*

- Jesus "shared his faith" by asking the Samaritan woman for a favor. When you think about "sharing your faith," what comes to your mind? How might you rethink the ways you share with friends, neighbors, co-workers in the light of how Jesus shared with the woman at the well? Treating others compassionately and kindly may attract their interest. If a co-worker or friend asks what you did last weekend, might you simply put "went to church" in your list of answers? Brainstorm authentic, comfortable ways you can share your faith in Jesus with others.*

*Prayer: Loving God, I want to follow Jesus' example and break down the walls that divide humanity. Teach me how to be*

*a light to those in my sphere of influence, to draw them to you. Amen*

*Thursday, May 22 – Read Luke 10:25-29 – Note how Luke described this exchange: "A legal expert stood up to test Jesus." He meant that this man was not there to learn from Jesus, but was trying to smoke out Jesus' "flawed" views. When Jesus agreed that Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 summed up God's desire for humans, the legal expert pushed harder. The Message renders verse 29 as*

*“looking for a loophole.” The gist of his question seems to have been, “Where would you draw the line at loving others?”*

- *Jewish teachers usually applied “neighbor” in Leviticus 19:18 to fellow Israelites. That ignored Leviticus 19:33-34, which extended God’s command beyond all national or ethnic lines. Where do you tend to put the limits of God’s command to love our neighbors? Do you think it’s impractical and unrealistic to consider everyone on earth your neighbor?*
- *Jesus affirmed the connection between, “love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind,” with, “love your neighbor as yourself.” Is it possible to live into either half of that combination without the other? How do you find God’s love for you, and your love for God, spilling into all your other relationships?*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, when I want to test you, to argue with you, remind me of this legal expert. Remind me that you came to change my heart, not just to give me more interesting opinions. Amen*

*Friday, May 23 – Read Luke 10:29-37– Jesus answered the “who is my neighbor?” question with a story. Two religious leaders passed by a beaten up man left by the road side. Touching a dead body would defile them ceremonially, and since they couldn’t tell if he was alive or dead, they probably thought it wise to avoid contact. Along came a Samaritan (one of “those people”!), and he went “above and beyond” to help the badly hurt Jewish man. Jesus simply asked. “Which one of these showed mercy?”*

- *Scholar N. T. Wright wrote, “Jesus asked, ‘Can you recognize the hated Samaritan as your neighbor?’ If you can’t, you might be left for dead. Jesus’...challenge to Israel is to see that the way of confrontation with Samaritans, Romans and pagans of whatever sort is not the way of living and showing God’s grace. He is urgently offering the way of peace, and only the ‘children of peace’ (10:6) will escape the self-inflicted judgment that will befall those bent on violence.” In light of Jesus’ story, who are your previously unrecognized neighbors?*

*List all the “Samaritans” you can think of in your world, and pray about how to become open to seeing them as “neighbors.”*

- *Have you ever been helped by someone you didn’t expect to help you, someone you thought of as an “outsider” or an enemy? How did that experience affect your attitude toward that person (and others who are different from you) moving forward?*

*Prayer: Loving Lord, help me love the people I find unlovable. Change my heart to more and more see all people (including myself) as you see us—as your children, worthy of love. Amen*

*Saturday, May 24 – Read Acts 1:7-8, 8:4-17 – Probably a few eyebrows went up among the disciples when Jesus said they would be his witnesses “in Samaria.” But a few years later, first Phillip and then Peter and John found a warm reception for the good news of Jesus in Samaria. It was a crucial first step in carrying out the world-wide mission that has now reached you, and included you in God’s worldwide family of love, grace and service.*

- *Pastor Bruce Larson wrote, “The lawyer who asks Jesus the question, ‘Who is my neighbor?’ is trying to find a new rule, a new law. In the Good Samaritan story, Jesus indicates that the law of love puts an end to legalism. No more laws, no more rules. We are simply to love one another as He has loved us.” How can letting Jesus’ love you renew and deepen your heart? How can “letting go” of your prejudices allow God to give you the freedom to love God, yourself and your neighbor?*

*Prayer: O God, as you change me from the inside out, set me free to see as you see, to love as you love and to treat others as I would have them treat me. Amen.*

*Family Activity: As a family, discuss your response to each of these scenarios: 1) A new person comes to your Sunday school class and doesn’t know anyone. 2) The person standing in front of you at the grocery store drops a dollar. 3) Your neighbor is an older woman who lives alone, and a storm knocks all her trash cans over. Talk together about ways to be kind in each of these situations. This week*

*ask each other, “How were you kind to someone today? How were you not very kind today? How can you do a better job being kind tomorrow?” Pray together and ask God to help you be kind.*

## ***Stories that Changed the World***

### ***"The Meaning of Love"***

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber

May 17-18, 2014 at First United Methodist Church, Durango

#### **Scripture: Luke 10:25-37**

*25 One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: "Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 Jesus replied, "What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?" 27 The man answered, "'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.' And, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"*

*28 "Right!" Jesus told him. "Do this and you will live!" 29 The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*

*30 Jesus replied with a story: "A Jewish man was traveling on a trip from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road.*

*31 "By chance a priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. 32 A Temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side.*

*33 "Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. 34 Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. 35 The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, 'Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I'll pay you the next time I'm here.'*

*36 "Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?" Jesus asked.*

*37 The man replied, "The one who showed him mercy."*

*Then Jesus said, "Yes, now go and do the same."*

**VIDEO      The Meaning of Love – Sermon Starter**

**SLIDE      The Meaning of Love**

Which would you be? Would you be the Levite or the Samaritan? That is the question that Jesus intends for us to ponder when he tells us this parable. Am I the Levite or the Samaritan?

Please take out of your bulletin the Message Notes and Meditation Moments. Your sermon notes are a chance to follow along and write down things

you would like to remember from today's message. The study guide is a chance for you to do some reading of the Bible on your own this week and I would encourage you to use that because we're reading through the parables of Jesus throughout this sermon series.

Over the last couple of weeks we have learned about the parables of Jesus. We have learned that a parable is a story or an analogy from everyday life. It is something that the people of Jesus' day would have been very familiar with. Jesus talks about it and then he says, "The kingdom of God' or God's character, or God's will for us is like this every day ordinary kind of thing."

The challenge for us is that what was every day and ordinary 2000 years ago is not necessarily an everyday ordinary occurrence for us today. Sometimes we have to interpret the analogy first and then say, "How does that relate to God's will or God's character or the kingdom of God today?"

This is true to some degree in this parable of the Good Samaritan. Anybody can read this parable and get the main point, but there are aspects of this parable that begin to come to life when we understand the context a bit better and what was going on 2000 years ago in Israel. I think when we understand this context will begin to see things we might not have seen before.

In this particular parable of the Good Samaritan the context is a conversation that Jesus is having with a lawyer. This particular lawyer is not a secular lawyer, but a religious lawyer. This man is an expert in the Law of Moses. As an expert in the Law of Moses he sees Jesus teaching and he wonders, "Where is this guy coming from?" If this man was a politician he might be wondering if Jesus was a Democrat or Republican. This lawyer is wondering what Jesus' perspective is on the law.

The Scripture says that this lawyer went to test Jesus. Later in the Gospels it says that the Pharisees would try to trap Jesus, but this particular lawyer wasn't trying to trap him. He was simply trying to test him and see what Jesus' interpretation was on the Law of Moses.

So he asked Jesus a question. "Jesus, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

This is a big question and it is important. Jesus' answer will help this lawyer peg Jesus. Whatever Jesus says will help lawyer know what his interpretive school of thought is.

But Jesus, being a good teacher, doesn't give an immediate answer to the



question. Instead he says, **"Well, what do you think?"**

The lawyer, being well versed in the Law of Moses, says, "I think we must love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength and with all our mind. And we must love our neighbor as we love ourselves."

You are familiar with those two things if you've been here before. You might note that Jesus teaches those as the two great commandments. All the Law and the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament, are summarized by those two statements.

In Matthew and Mark's gospel, Jesus speaks these words. But in Luke's Gospel it is the lawyer who speaks these words and Jesus says to him after he says this, "You have answered correctly. Do these things and you will have eternal life."

As I think about this question the lawyer was asking I have to wonder if he was asking the right question.

#### **SLIDE      The Context and the Question**

What's wrong with the questions the Lawyer asks Jesus?

It is certainly a question that many of us are interested in. Billy Graham has spent his whole life trying to answer this question for people. He has gathered huge groups of people in stadiums to try and answer this question for people who are wondering, "Am I going to go to heaven or hell?"

One of the persons who came to Dinner with the Pastors this last week and then joined the church shared that he came to faith in Jesus Christ at a Billy Graham crusade when he was a young man. Billy Graham says that in order to go to heaven you just need to receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and people flock forward by the thousands. They want to go to heaven and who doesn't?! Christianity has focused much of its attention in the 20th and 21st century on helping people know how to get to heaven.

But again I wonder if this is really the right question. I wonder if it would have been better if the man asked the question like this:

#### **SLIDE      "Teacher, what do I have to do to please God?"**

How would I need to live my life in order to honor the Lord and to bless him? How can I live as a fully authentic human being and what would it look like to do that in God's eyes?

As it is, the question sort of sounds like this to me, "What is the bare minimum I have to do to escape hell and get to heaven? What do I have to do to have paradise? How can I save my skin at this point?"

These might seem like the same questions: What do I need to do to have eternal life or how can I please God? Maybe, but I think there is a difference between those two questions.

The difference is motivation.

Sometimes when I come home from work one of the kids will be really nice to me. I mean they are really nice to me. They start with, "Daddy." Whenever they start with that word I know there is something they are going to ask for. So I wait for a while and they talk a bit and might even do nice things for me. Finally they hit me, "Daddy, do you suppose that 'so and so' can spend the night this week? Daddy, can I watch a movie? Daddy..."

There would be a catch that went with the sweetness. That is so much different than the times when they are sweet, kind, caring and they don't want anything in return. They just say, "Daddy you're my dad and I love you."

There is a big difference between those two. On the one hand you feel used and on the other hand you just feel blessed.

Sometimes in our religiosity we can use God. We can use our religion to get what we want and it is still all about us.

Actually, when we first come to faith in Christ it really is all about us. We want all the blessings of being a Christian and we want the joy unspeakable. We want the peace that passes all understanding to guard our hearts and minds and we want eternal life. We want all those things and so we are willing to do whatever it takes to get those things, because it's really all about us.

But at some point, as we continue to mature in faith, we realize that it is not all about us. We realize that we are going to love God and we are going to love people. We are going to try to honor God and to do God's will because it blesses God and others, not just because it blesses us. In the end, we will have eternal life and we will have blessings. We will have joy unspeakable and an amazing peace.

But we realize that it is not about us, it's about God.

Brian McLaren wrote this book, "The Hidden Message of Jesus." We carry this book in our bookstore and in it McLaren shows these diagrams that are rather

helpful. He says that this is how our contemporary gospel is presented many times. Notice how big the print is on the first line.

**SLIDE      Information on how to go to heaven after you die (Graphic)**

## **Information on how to go to heaven after you die**

### **Increasing your personal happiness and success through God**

**Character development**

**Spiritual experience**

**Social and global transformation**

Do you see what that looks like? At first it is all about, "What am I going to get?" Then in the end is about, "What am I going to give?"

Brian captures this in a diagram that I appreciate.

**SLIDE      Me Gospel Diagram (Graphic)**

You see the large circle is the self. For many of us, before we are Christians and even in the beginning of our Christian life, it is really all about us and what we are going to get from God. Do I feel fed in church and what is in it for me?

Then after that there is a smaller circle that represents our church. We focus on what is going on here inside the walls of this place.

Finally, only last, there is a sense in which we are going to minister in the world, when we have little time left over.

As we continue to mature in our faith and to mature in Christ and to become more like Jesus Christ in the world, it should look more like this next diagram.

**SLIDE      Missional Gospel Diagram (Graphic.)**

You find that the self is the smallest thing and it is pushing out into the church where we come to find healing. And that equips and inspires us to live out our faith first in the church as we minister to one another, and ultimately the church is about sending people back out into the world to transform the world into the kingdom of God. We go out to love God and love God's people and to be his hands and his heart and his voice.

This is more what the Christian life ought to look like, which is why I think the lawyer was asking the wrong question.

It really wasn't about, "What do I have to do to inherit eternal life? What is the bare minimum?" Instead it should be, "How can I honor and bless and glorify God? How can I serve God no matter what the consequences are?" In the end you'll find that blessings do come from that, and your focus is in the right place.

The lawyer answered the question correctly and Jesus told him, "Well done. That is the right answer."

But it is pretty clear from the next question the lawyer asks that the man might have understood with his head but he didn't quite get it with his heart. The lawyer says, "Okay Jesus, I know I am supposed to love God with all my heart, mind and soul. I know I am supposed to love my neighbor as myself. But Jesus tell me, who is my neighbor?"

In other words, "Who are the people I absolutely have to love and who do I not have to love?"

#### **SLIDE      Who do I HAVE to love?**

That is a good, clarifying question. It is the kind of question the lawyers and the religious leaders of Jesus' day asked. There are a number of Commandments and laws that have to do with the neighbor. Even one of the 10 Commandments tells us not to covet our neighbors' things. So the Jews would debate among themselves, "Who exactly is our neighbor that we have to love or treat in a certain way?"

They wondered if it was everybody or just the Jewish people. Is it just the Jewish people or just the Jewish people who are faithful to God and not the ones who are unfaithful? So there was a sense of having and needing to clarify who you had to really love.

To answer this question Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. I want you to listen carefully to the story of the Good Samaritan because it is meant to speak to you today.

Jesus begins by telling us about a man, presumably Jewish, who was leaving Jerusalem and on his way to Jericho. On the road he was accosted by thieves and bandits. He was beaten until he was nearly dead. His clothing was stripped from his body and everything he had was stolen from him, and he was left there to die.

We might not understand this very much because many of us have never traveled the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. We don't really know what was

happening then on that road, but all the people who were listening to Jesus were shaking their heads and going, "Yes, that fool should not have gone down that road from Jerusalem to Jericho by himself! He should have gone with other people because everyone knows that is a dangerous road."

Let me give you a little geography lesson for a moment and show you a map of the holy land. On the left is the Mediterranean Sea. Remember that the holy land is only about 60 miles wide, which would be from here to just beyond Pagosa Springs. It is about 150 miles from north to south which would from here to about Grand Junction. It is not really a large piece of land.

**SLIDE        Israel in Jesus Time (Graphic)**

You will notice the Sea of Galilee at the top. Jesus spent most of his time there in ministry. The Sea of Galilee drains into the Jordan River which makes its way all the way down here to the Dead Sea, which is the lowest point on planet Earth.

**SLIDE        Israel in 3 parts (Graphic)**

In Jesus' day the holy land was divided into three parts. There was Galilee. There was Samaria. And there was Judea. Jews and Gentiles both lived in Galilee, although it was primarily Jewish. Judea was almost exclusively Jewish.

Samaria was the home of the Samaritans. Samaritans were people who had been transplanted to the holy land in the eighth century before Christ. The Assyrian Empire located in modern day Iraq took most of the Israelites out of the northern area of Israel, which is known as Samaria, and transplanted foreigners there. Those foreigners married and the straggling Israelites who were still there intermarried. They adopted part of the Israelite religion, but not necessarily all of it.

In Jesus' day the Samaritans were considered heretics. They were considered unclean and in some cases worse than Gentiles in the eyes of some Judeans. In many ways they were despised. There was a lot of bad blood between those in Samaria and those in Galilee and Judea.

**SLIDE        Israel in Jesus Time (Graphic)**

Jerusalem, you can see on this map, is not far from Jericho, which is by the Jordan River near the Dead Sea. There is a path that wound its way through the hillside and wilderness that linked these two cities.

That path was challenging to walk. It started at 2500 feet above sea level

and went to 800 feet below sea level. So there was a 3300 foot decline in the altitude. In addition, it was about 20 miles in distance and it was a difficult road. Here's a picture of the road to Jericho.

**SLIDE        Road to Jericho (Graphic)**

**SLIDE        Road to Jericho 2 (Graphic)**

This is just one part of it. It is actually easier than many parts. You can see the road in the foreground and in the back ground you can see the cliffs and the jagged outcroppings. It was rocky, dry, desolate and hard to walk. As people walked down the road, bandits would hide in the clefts of the rocks. They would hide in the caves and if someone was coming alone or even just two people, the bandits would come out and attack them and steal their belongings. This was known in the ancient world to be a road you don't travel alone. Up to the fifth century we have records of secular historians talking about how dangerous this road was. All of the people listening to Jesus would have understood this about that road.

This man is left for dead on the side of the road and a priest makes his way down the path. As the priest walks down this road, he sees the Jewish man who has been beaten and left for dead, and the priest walks to the other side of the road and makes his way on down to Jericho.

Then a Levite comes along. You might remember that a Levite was the assistant to the priests. They were also teachers of the law. In fact, the lawyer questioning Jesus may have been a Levite. The Levite sees the man on the side of the road and he also walks to the other side of the road and walks on by.

These are the two people we would've expected to do something good for the man who was broken and beaten and left for dead. Everyone who listened to the story would have expected this.

I can tell you with certainty that the priests and the Levites did not like this story very much. You will remember, as Jesus continued his Ministry, that they were agitated by him and it was because of stories like this, no doubt, that they decided to crucify him. Jesus embarrassed them and publicly humiliated them and pointed out their own hypocrisy.

But here's the thing about the priests and the Levites. I don't think they were bad people. I think they loved God. They wanted to do the right thing, but they had a temporary lapse in judgment. Some people say they didn't touch the

man because, according to Jewish law, if you touched a dead body, you would be unclean for seven days. I don't find this interpretation very compelling.

But I do think they might have been in a hurry. They may not have felt they had time and they may have believed someone else would come after them and take care of it. Have you ever thought that? You saw something and you thought to yourself, "Well, somebody else will take care of that." You don't feel like you have the time or the energy.

Several years ago there was an article published in Fast Company magazine. It reported on a study done a number of years ago by researchers at Princeton University. They asked a group of seminary students at Princeton Theological Seminary to prepare a lesson on the parable of the Good Samaritan. Then they set them up.

They hired actors and actresses on the campus to be people who are in trouble. The actors and actresses were stationed somewhere on the campus so they would be in the path of the students as they made their way from their dorm to their classroom. The researchers then would call the students in their dorm and tell them their presentation had been moved up and that they had to hurry and get to their classroom. As the students rushed to do their presentation of their Bible study on the parable of the Good Samaritan, they would have to pass by one of the actors or actresses in distress.

90% of the seminary students walked past those who were in trouble because they were in a hurry so they could get to teach a lesson on the parable of the Good Samaritan. There were a handful of students who actually stepped over people that appeared to be passed out to get to chapel on time to preach about the Good Samaritan.

Personally, I thought that study was rather mean because I know what it's like to be a seminary student and to be in a hurry. But the reality is we all get that way sometimes and we put blinders on and miss those who are in distress.

But I'm not convinced that this is really even the answer about why the priest and Levite passed by. I wonder if they might have just been afraid. I wonder if they were scared that this might be a trap and the person who is sitting there on the side of the road might be setting them up. Then someone would come from the hillside and attack them. Maybe they were just scared.

Several years ago I was driving back from between Alamosa and South Fork on Highway 160 around ten o'clock at night. I had just finished doing an on-site



interview for a ministerial candidate who was in the last step of the process of ordination. We had spent several hours talking with this woman and what it meant for her to be a pastor, and we had interviewed people in her church to give us feedback about whether she was effective or not. It was a good meeting and she was approved.

I didn't want to drive all the way back to Durango and so I was going to stay at a hotel in South Fork. As I was cruising along going 65 miles an hour, I thought I noticed a person sitting on the side of the road. They were on the opposite side and as I looked in my rearview mirror, I thought I made out a silhouette of someone sitting up because there were headlights shining from the car behind me. I wasn't sure what to do. So I slowed down pulled over to the side of the road, got my cell phone, and called 911.

I told them I thought there was a person sitting on the side of the road and I wasn't sure what to do. The person on the other end told me that someone else had called in already and they were sending a state trooper. I was relieved. As I hung up the phone I wondered, "Should I go back and check on the person until trooper gets there?"

It was dark and the person could've had a gun or something like that. I have kids now. I have to think of them. My heart began to race a bit. I thought to myself, "We are way out in the boonies and you never know in today's world what might happen." So I said a prayer and I drove off.

I've thought about that many times since it happened. I, your pastor, was the Levite or the priest.

It's kind of hard how to figure out how to help people sometimes. When is it safe? When is it not safe? When it is daylight I stop and help people all the time on the side of the road. But I'm not sure I want my daughter to do that when she is 16. I will probably tell her not to stop, but to call somebody. Call me or call 911, but I don't want her stopping and helping someone where she could get hurt.

I don't know if that is the right answer or not. What will I be teaching her and yet, I am concerned for her safety.

You are downtown in a big city like Denver or Albuquerque or New York and there is someone who is panhandling for money. Are they going to take your \$10 that you give them and buy booze or drugs, or are they going to feed themselves and their family like they say?



My first Ministry setting was downtown in Denver and I worked with people on the streets. People would come in to see me for help and I would call around and find out if they had been scamming everybody at all of the agencies and all the churches. Some people would come in for help, and you knew if you didn't help them, it would be the end of the line for them. I could never give them as much help as I wanted to because there wouldn't be enough left to help other people. It was always hard to figure out how to help people when you have limited resources and overwhelming demand.

Just about every week I heard about one of the clients that we had helped who had died on the streets and it broke my heart. They weren't just nameless panhandlers because I knew their name and I looked into their eyes when I gave them the bag of food.

I had a knife pulled on me, and a gun pulled on me, and let me tell you, after that you are more skeptical about stopping to help. Luckily the person who led our ministry was a little old lady who had no fear. She would step right in front of the knife or gun wielding person, who clearly had been drinking, and tell them, "You take that thing outside and don't come in here again until you are sober!" Let me tell you, that kind of experience will shake you up. I don't always know when it is safe to help. Do you know?

I think what Jesus is teaching us in this parable is that your neighbor is anyone who needs your help. I don't think this would apply in every situation where you might put yourself in danger, but what Jesus is telling us is that if we want to inherit eternal life, we need to cultivate a generous heart and learn to serve those that are different from ourselves—however they need.

That is exactly what the Samaritan does. Bear in mind that the Samaritan was hated by the Jews. In fact, the Jew he stops to help probably would not have given him the time of day if they had met on the road in some other circumstance. This Samaritan knows that this man he is helping probably despises him and would see him as his enemy. So notice what happens with this man.

Listen to the passage from Luke 10 verse 33 and following.

**SLIDE      33 "Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. 34 Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. 35 The next day he**

**handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, 'Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I'll pay you the next time I'm here.'**

So the Samaritan puts this man on his donkey and walks 10-15 miles. Those two silver coins represented two days wages. So figure out how much you make in a day and multiply by two and that is what the Samaritan left so the man will be taken care of. He was moved with compassion and his heart was touched. This is a powerful statement about the kind of heart we're supposed to cultivate in ourselves.

Dallas Willard, a great teacher and writer about the Christian faith says this.

**SLIDE      *"Christian discipleship is when we routinely and easily and naturally begin to do the things that God would want us to do."***

It does not come naturally to do these things until you find yourself changed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Over time you will find yourself instantly and impulsively doing the things that God wants you to do. That's what this Samaritan was doing. It is interesting that this is the most unexpected hero, yet in our story, he is the example for us. Again we ask this question, "Which will you be, the Levite or the Samaritan?"

Dr. Martin Luther King's last sermon that he preached the night before he was assassinated was the famous, ***"I Have Been to the Mountaintop"*** sermon. Do you know that the Scripture text for that sermon was this parable of the Good Samaritan? He preached that sermon in Memphis, Tennessee, in support of the sanitation workers who were striking because they were so poorly treated. They were trying to work but they were not earning a living wage. So Dr. King went there to stand with them.

As Dr. King preached on the sermon, he said something very profound. He said the Levite and the Samaritan each asked two different questions as they came upon the wounded man. The Levite was asking:

**SLIDE      What will happen to me if I stop and help this man?**

But the Samaritan asked this question.

**SLIDE      What will happen to him if I don't stop and help him?**

It is the difference highlighted in that slide we looked at earlier between the big self and a little self. It is the difference between it all being about me and it being all about pursuing God's purpose in our lives.

You know this is one of three parables that deal with this same issue. This was a big issue for Jesus. He told another parable of the last judgment – the parable of the sheep and the goats. Jesus says to the people who are listening to him, "Now at the last day I will come back and I will separate the nations before me as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep will enter into eternal bliss and the goats will enter into eternal damnation."

Do you remember the criteria by which he judged which went where? The people who went to heaven were as shocked and surprised as the people who ended up in hell. This was the criteria.

***"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was sick and in prison and you visited me. I was naked and you gave me something to wear. And as much as you did it to the least of these, you have done it unto me."*** (Matthew 25:31-46 paraphrase)

Clearly this is important to Jesus. I want you to know one other thing that Martin Luther King said about this passage as we wrap up our sermon today. A year before he died, Dr. King preached a very different sermon on the same passage. In the sermon here is what he said.

**SLIDE**      ***"On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will only be 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 make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."***

This is where Dr. King got himself in trouble on a regular basis. It's not hard to tell people, "Would you give some food in the food drive and would you give your coat in the 'Share the Warmth' campaign?"

But when you start asking questions like, "Why are there people who are poor in our society? Why do so many children go without health care? What might we need to do to change that? What might we change in order to address those issues?"

That's where you start getting into trouble and people start getting mad. Please listen carefully. The Levites say, "Those are big questions and I don't think I

can figure out the answers. I can't really be involved in those political things and social issues and they involve ethics and other complicated things. I am just going to keep my nose to the grindstone and move forward."

But Samaritans ask, "How can I be part of changing the world? How can I be a part of these really big issues and help change them so this world might become more like the kingdom of God?"

Here's what I want to encourage you to do. Here at First United Methodist Church I don't spoon feed you who to vote for in the elections—but I am going to tell you that you need to vote in the next election. You need to be doing research on who you vote for and don't just show up and pick the name that you like the best or the one who has the best commercials or who happens to be the one in your political party.

We need to be thinking and asking questions. Which of these candidates represents the position that I think might change the world for the best. I'm not going to give you the answers but you need to think critically about these things.

What I want is for us together to think and pray, "How can we change our world into God's kingdom through our political process?"

If we do not take this seriously, then we have been the Levite and not the Samaritan. We are called to change things and to address the issues that are causing painful moments in our world and in the lives of people.

Millard Fuller, who is the founder of Habitat for Humanity, once said this. He was asked in an interview, "Why do people build habitat houses?" Here's what he said.

**SLIDE**      *"Overwhelmingly the motivation is a religious one. The volunteers feel that what they are doing is pleasing to God. The Scriptures could not be clearer. In the Bible there are over 700 references to helping the poor. Going to church on Sunday is the beginning of religion and not the end of it. There is a certain emptiness and just a verbal expression of faith, if that is all you have. It is like eating cotton candy at the fair. It looks like it's really large, but when you bite into it you find out it is only so much sugar and air."*

**SLIDE**      **Cotton Candy Christianity.**

I want to challenge you as Christians at First United Methodist Church in Durango to not have a Christianity that looks like cotton candy. I pray you will

have a substantive Christianity that will engage your mind and your heart and in which you are serving God with your hands. I pray that it would become simple and easy and routine obedience for you to see people who are in need and for you to be the hands of Christ for those people.

I hope that when people think of you at this church they say, "Those people are actually living out the gospel. They are concerned for people and they have sacrificed themselves in order to live out their faith in the world."

That is a compelling gospel people will be drawn to.

This week I wanted to find some stories of Good Samaritans, so I googled and found thousands of stories from this past week of not only kind deeds, but heroic deeds. I read about Patrick McConlogue who, when approached by someone on the street asking for money, offered the stranger either \$100 or a new laptop and training on how to write computer code so the man could get off the street. Leo Grand took him up on his offer and now has a job instead of a handout. There were stories of kids buying coats for the homeless and food for the needy. There was the story of the young couple that scrambled down a mountainside here in Colorado to help a mother of four who had driven off the side of the road. There was a challenge from Pope Francis to care for strangers from other countries who have to leave because of violence.

#### **SLIDE      Michael Patterson**

And there was the heroic story of Michael Patterson who dove into a creek to save a 4 year old girl. He broke his spine when he dove in and even with only one arm working managed to pull her to safety. Michael passed away earlier this month from injuries sustained in that accident.

As I read all of these stories, here's what hit me. Why don't we read about those on the cover of MSN or CNN or FOX? There are hundreds of amazing stories yet we are enamored by the horrible ones. This is our human condition, and our human struggle, and it's why Jesus tells this story and why this story captures our hearts some 2000 years later.

The first time I missed it. After thinking about it for a couple of years I thought to myself, "I'm not going to miss it next time."

Today is a second chance for you. We have all missed it. We have all turned our backs and walked away from people who are in need. We have done it in our businesses; when someone with puffy eyes showed up and we didn't stop and ask

what was wrong because we were in a hurry to get our next meeting.

I remind you of what John Lennon once said.

**SLIDE        “Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans.”**

A great pastor once told me that the interruptions to my ministry are my ministry. It is those interruptions in life where ministry can really happen.

Your road to Jericho is on your way to work and school; the question is: tomorrow when you leave, will you be the Levite or the Samaritan? Let's pray.

**SLIDE        Prayer**

*Oh God we are grateful for your mercy and grace. It seems so simple. If we could just love you with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength and love our neighbors as we love ourselves we would inherit eternal life. But the reason why we need you, Jesus, is because we don't seem to be able to do that very well.*

*Forgive us. Help us to be people after your own heart—to love you and love others not because we are expecting to get something from you but simply for the sake of doing it. Help us, oh God, to think the way you think, to see people the way you see them and look for the opportunities to help and serve.*

*Help us to know your wisdom and your heart when it comes to people who are in need. Help us as a church to pursue your will in all things. Help us be Samaritans, in Jesus name, Amen.*