

“Sunday School Revisited: III - The One Who Stops”

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Luke 10:25-37

If you attended Sunday School, or if you have attended church for any length of time, no doubt you have heard the story of the Good Samaritan more times than you can count. You could have probably pretty much told it to me before it was even read! It's one of those stories that's lively and vivid, and sticks in your mind.

A man was on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho and he was attacked by robbers. They beat him badly, took everything he had, and left him for dead. There he was, critically injured lying on the side of the road, waiting for someone to help him, and lo and behold, down the road comes a man. He happens to be a priest, a man of God, a religious leader. And what does he do? Does he rush to the man's aid? Nope. He sees the injured man, and promptly passes by him on the other side of the road.

A little while later, along comes another man. This time it's a Levite, a man who, by all rights, we would expect to have mercy and compassion for someone wounded. But alas, he too, sees the injured man, and passes him by, giving no aid whatsoever.

Finally, a third man comes along. He is a Samaritan, and of all people, he is the one we would least expect to care for this injured man, because to the people who listened to Jesus tell this story, Samaritans were despised, and deemed worthless and without any redeeming value. So, of course, they expected Jesus to say that the Samaritan, too, passed by on the other side.

We know that the Samaritan did exactly the opposite. He went right to the man, knelt down, and cared for him. He bandaged him up and then took him to a place where he could receive even better care - and he even paid for it with his own money.

And Jesus says to his listeners, which of course, includes us, that that is what we are to do - care for those who are hurting, care for our neighbors, and all men and women are our neighbors.

Now, over the years, you've probably heard a lot of the same things about this lesson. Shock that the religious ones in the story were the ones who didn't care for the injured man. Shock that the one who did care for him was the supposed “bad

guy” of the story. You may have even heard that there are those who think the injured man got what he deserved, for he knew that the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was an extremely dangerous stretch of road, and he shouldn’t have been there. If he hadn’t, he wouldn’t have been hurt.

You may have heard all of those things about this story, and they are all thought-provoking. But today I want us to look at this old Sunday School story in a little different way. I want us to look at it more broadly - I want us to think about stopping versus not stopping - period. Not worrying about who you are, or what your station is in life - the issue is stopping versus not stopping.

For you see, I think that’s the crux of the matter, and I think it’s especially important for us who live in this day and age. We don’t know the exact reasons that the priest and the Levite passed the injured man and ignored him. But I can venture a guess as to why you and I might. It’s that we’re constantly on the move, we’re constantly busy, not just physically, but mentally and emotionally also.

We’re constantly on the move, and we rarely stop. As a matter of fact, when I was working on this sermon one afternoon this week, I was doing it on the back porch of the parsonage. The porch looks out on the corner of Locust Lane and High Street, and it’s a corner with three stop signs. Can I tell you how few times people stop for those stop signs? It is absolutely astounding. I think the Town of Elkton could solve all of its financial problems if it just gave a ticket to everyone who ran those stop signs.

Well, anyway, I was thinking about how much we’re on the move and not taking the time to slow down, and I was looking at those cars going through those stop signs, and I decided to do a little experiment. For ten minutes, I kept track of how many cars went through that intersection, and how many actually came to a complete stop at those stop signs, and it was astounding - the high percentage of cars that just rolled right on through them!

We don’t want to stop, we’re constantly on the move! Chances are that we would pass by that injured man, not because we don’t care, but because we’re too much in a hurry to get where we need to go - to work, or school, or shopping, or church, or soccer practice, or dance recitals, or dinners with friends - or you name it. We’re constantly on the move, and I wonder, how many injured people, how many people in need, have we passed by in our haste to get somewhere?

And if it’s not that we’re on the move to get somewhere, it may be that we pass by those who are injured, those who are in need, because we’re so distracted by other things these days. If you don’t think that’s true, let me tell you something

amazing that happened to me this week. Just when I was working on this sermon, I got two magazines in the mail - one was the current AARP magazine, and the other, a periodical to which I subscribe called The Christian Century. I opened them up and I couldn't believe my eyes. In the AARP magazine, I found this article, "May I Have My Attention Please?" and in The Christian Century, this one, "Pay Attention." Can you believe that?

Let me read you a little snippet from each of them. From the AARP article:

"Welcome to the Attention Crisis - also known as the 'culture of distraction,' 'information-fatigue syndrome' or simply 'modern life.' It's what happens when technology's flashing, beeping, dun-dun-daahing stimuli scramble your focus, shred your nerves, and squander your productivity. (AARP Magazine, July/August 2010, p. 32)

The Christian Century article was all about our lack of attention these days. The author starts out by talking about being in a group of United Methodist pastors who decided to do a prayer retreat together, and just as they were getting started, one of them pulled out his Blackberry to check his messages!

And then he goes on to talk about a night when he and his wife went out for dinner, just before she would be out of town for a few days on business. He cancelled a meeting to have dinner with her, and says that they had only been at dinner for maybe 15 minutes, when her Blackberry buzzed and she reached for it, saying to him, "Do you mind if I take this call?"

Then, he says, after he said he didn't mind, (which of course he really did, but knew that saying no would ruin the evening), she took the call. Listen to what he writes then:

"As soon as she began speaking on the phone she was gone - except geographically, which she was the next day anyway. She never really came back to our table, our meal or our conversation. I'm not suggesting that the call wasn't important. But I received the clear message that something or someone was more important to her in that moment than I was."

He writes later, "We see it all the time. We're on our cell phones talking to someone other than those at the table with us. We're putting somebody on hold while we take another call. We are shuttled by device and distraction to somebody's subroutine. The message is always the same: whoever is calling needs my attention more than you do; whatever this call concerns, it is more important than the present conversation; whoever or whatever is 'out there' is more interesting than this or you or now." (The Christian Century, June 18, 2010, Thomas R. Steagold, "Pay Attention," p. 12)

Wow! I don't know about you, but I squirmed when I read both of those articles. I'm as guilty as anyone else of being distracted in this day and age. Just like many of you I have three different phones on which to receive calls and messages, I have two different email accounts, and a Facebook account. I have a GPS in my car, and a calendar filled to overflowing - it's no wonder we're distracted, is it? It's no wonder we're not paying attention. It's no wonder, sadly, that we don't see those who are injured, those who are in need. We're too distracted to slow down, and look around.

Yet, friends, that's exactly what we're called to do as children of God, and faithful disciples of Jesus Christ - the one who perfected the art of stopping! Search the Gospels, and you won't have to go far to see Jesus stopping. He stopped to look up a tree and see Zaccheus. He stopped in the middle of a crowd to see who it was that had tugged on the hem of his robe, seeking healing. He stopped to be with little children, even when his disciples and those around him urged him to keep moving. He stopped to see that people were fed, when others said they could go home and feed themselves. I could go on and on, but you see the picture clearly, don't you - Jesus stopped! He saw those who were in need, and he stopped!

And he calls us to stop too! And oh my, there are so many waiting for us to do so. I read an excellent sermon this week on the Good Samaritan story by a pastor from Seattle named Edward Markquart. He called it "Jericho Road" and what it said throughout the sermon is that the Jericho Road, that treacherous stretch of road which led to the man's beating and suffering, still exists today - oh not just physically in Israel, but everywhere. The Jericho Road is wherever someone is hurting and needs someone to help.

He said the Jericho road is the nursing home where Alzheimer's patients are suffering. The Jericho road is the section of town where hunger and violence is rampant. The Jericho road is the home where a chronically ill person is cared for by relatives. The Jericho road is where someone's heart has been broken by a loved one leaving. The Jericho road is where someone is lonely and needs a friend.

He's right - the Jericho road is wherever there is someone who is hurting and needs for us to stop. It might be in your neighborhood, it might be where you work or go to school, it might even be in your home. Somewhere, sometime, someone who is hurting needs you to stop and care for them - give them your time, your love, your compassion.

In order to do that, you might need to stop moving yourself, or give up your dependence or addiction to those things that distract you. I want to tell you about something I did recently - not in any way to boast - but simply to share with you

what I decided to do. When I had those weeks recuperating when I couldn't get around, I had a lot of time to think and pray. One of the things I realized was that I was doing exactly the things I'm talking about today - being on the move too much, trying to do too much, trying to be all things to all people, and it clearly had taken a toll on me, and I wonder, how many people I passed by?

Well, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, I decided to make some changes. Do you know what I did? I resigned from four different things in which I was involved. I wrote letters to the groups, and one of them was a committee that works closely with the Bishop, and I resigned. It was not easy - far from it. It was gut-wrenching, but I knew it was what I needed to do.

Now, I don't know what you need to do, but I do know that Jesus Christ wants us to love our neighbors, to reach out and take care especially of those who are in need, who are hurting in any way. We can't do that if we're constantly on the go, and constantly distracted. Maybe this old Sunday School story today will cause us to really ponder whether we are being the Christians Jesus calls us to be, and if we're not, making the changes we need to do so.

Let me finish by saying this. When we do stop to help someone who needs us, it will be so good for them, for they will see the love of God come alive right in front of them. But friends, it will also be good for us.

So I close today with two questions for you and for me:

What can you do to slow down?

And - What will it take for you to stop, so that you will have eyes to see, a heart to care, and hands to help?

Amen.