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St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
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Text: Luke 10:25-37

“Go and do likewise”

Growing up, I can remember the myriad of magazines my mother subscribed to-*McCall's*, *Good Housekeeping*, and the like. There are some she continues to receive, others she has since dropped, and still others that have been added to her repertoire like *Southern Living*. There is one magazine however, that has never darkened in her door-*The Reader's Digest*. I soon came to understand her not wanting to subscribe to it as it seemed to me that this “digest” was best read only-and this is no slam to any *Reader's Digest* fans- as one waited for a doctor or dentist appointment. So imagine my surprise when a very dear friend gave me a subscription for Christmas one year and for almost ten years now-I receive a gift once a month. I don't know if some of my mother has rubbed off on me but the ONLY redeeming qualities of that blessed magazine full of advertisements for hair rejuvenation treatments and prescription drugs are two columns: “Word Power” and the “Hero” stories. With “Word Power” you try to determine the meaning of a certain number of unusual words. The answers are found on the next page. I cheat (pause)-a lot. The “Hero” column also appeals to me because it always contains stories of spine tingling real events that have happened to individuals and the person or persons who saves the day and perhaps even a life.

A couple of examples:

A North Carolina teen had just gotten off her shift from Burger King and decided to spend some time shooting hoops with her six year old nephew. When she arrived at the house she couldn't find him, in fact, he hadn't been seen by anyone for at least an hour. The family began to search the grandmother's property and finally someone heard him calling for help. He had somehow fallen into an abandoned well filled with water and was 15 feet below clinging to rock and concrete. The family lowered a rope instructing him to tie it around his waist but the boy was too afraid to move. 911 was called but the girl knew that she had to act fast. She immediately tied the rope to herself and was lowered down through the well's narrow

opening and into the water. Though she herself could not swim she was able to get the rope onto her nephew. Fortunately, they were both saved before the paramedics arrived.

There is another story of a Delaware mother, who was on her way to pick up her son from a friend's house. It was dark and she accidentally turned onto an unfamiliar road. Somehow she drove off the road and suddenly found herself and the car stuck on railroad tracks unable to go forward or go in reverse. Fortunately, the headlights of the car caught the attention of a young college student. The young man came over and instructed the woman to put her car in neutral and he tried to give the car a push. Six inches was all the car needed to clear the tracks but the car would not budge. About 50 feet away, a group of students from a nearby University campus saw what was happening. They made their way to the car and pushed as best they could. Nothing happened. Suddenly, the ground began to shake, four dings signaled an oncoming train, red beacons flashed on the posts on both sides of the tracks, and the railroad gates dropped. Yes, soon beams of light appeared and the roar of the train's horn began to blare. "Get out of the car!" The youths got the stunned woman out of the car with the train only seconds away, unharmed. And that is not the end of the story. A couple of days later, the media asked the woman, the young man, and the frat brothers who had come to her aid that night to reunite at a local coffee shop. When the young men heard that the woman's insurer was not going to replace her car they began to think of how they could help her. It turns out that her story caught the attention of a family who was planning to donate a car to Goodwill. They called the frat brothers instead and they raised monies for repairs on the car and presented the car to the woman they had helped save.

It is not often when we hear stories such as these. The bad stuff that happens oftens gets the most press so it's good when we find some good news. The teenage girl and the college students were all Good Samaritans, and many of us, when we read or hear stories such as this wonder, "What if I had been the one find someone in such a predicament, what would I have done? Would I have been as courageous as those young adults? Would I have had what it takes to go down a well, knowing that I cannot swim or jump down on those tracks, with a train getting closer and closer, to help that woman? In other words, would I have been a 'Good Samaritan' that day?"

Some believe that this is the exactly the question that Jesus wants us to ponder. That that is perhaps why he told his story of the Good Samaritan

in the first place. The Parable of the Good Samaritan found only in Luke's gospel is the most familiar story Jesus ever told. The way we usually hear that parable is as Jesus' way of getting us to ask ourselves, "Am I willing, when circumstances arise, to be a Good Samaritan to other people? If I saw a person lying in a ditch somewhere or in trouble, would I risk myself to help someone? But is this all to this parable?"

In today's Gospel we are drawn into a conversation between Jesus and a lawyer, an "expert" in interpreting the Law of Moses. "In your view, Teacher" the lawyer asked Jesus, "just what do I need to do to inherit eternal life?" "You're the lawyer," said Jesus. "What does it say in the law?" "The law says, 'Love God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind and also love your neighbor as you love yourself.'" "Well, okay then" said Jesus. "You have the answer. Love God with all you've got and love your neighbor as yourself. Do this and you will live." But the lawyer was not ready to drop the conversation. "Ahh, but wait," he objected. "There's a problem with your definition here. Just what do you mean by 'neighbor'? Be precise here. Who exactly is my neighbor?"

We know that it was in response to that challenge that Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. It's not the story about the woman on the train tracks, of course, but it's like it. Jesus' parable is about a man traveling down to Jericho who is mugged by robbers and left for dead beside the road. So, like the woman whose car is stuck on the tracks, here is another person in a potential life-threatening situation. A man in desperate need of help. Nothing unusual about this, really. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was known to be extremely dangerous and unsafe to travel alone, so the fact that a man was beaten and robbed...well that was a familiar story. Nothing shocking. But now, two genuinely shocking things happen. The first shock is that two people, a priest and a Levite, who both could have helped, in fact who would have been expected to help, came by but *neither* did anything to help. The second, and even bigger shock is that the last person in the world, a Samaritan, a despised foreigner, is the one who mercifully rescues the injured man, binds up his wounds and takes the beaten man to an inn for shelter and rest.

After telling that story, Jesus now says to the lawyer, "So, now you define the term 'neighbor.' Which of these three proved to be the neighbor in this story?" The lawyer simply mumbles, "The one who showed mercy." "Go and do likewise," said Jesus.

As I said before, some people think that what Jesus is saying in this story is, "OK everybody, I want you to go out and be just like that Good Samaritan. He cared for someone in need; imitate him. Go and do likewise." But there are two problems with this. The first problem is that if this were really Jesus' point, then he probably would have told the story differently. He would have made it into a simple moral example and left out all that troubling Samaritan business. What he would have said is there was a man in trouble, and three people passed by who could have helped. Be like the third person. But this isn't a simple moral story. It's a parable, and parables always have a twist and something unexpected to be wrestled with, and in this story, it is the fact that a Samaritan, an outsider and rival, is the one who shows mercy to his enemy. That throws a monkey wrench into any simple explanation. There's something deeper going on here than merely, "OK people, let's all be like Mike."

The second problem is even more significant. If Jesus' point is that he wants us to imitate the compassion of the Good Samaritan, the sad fact is that we can't or don't readily do it. That is why the stories of the teenager who rescued her nephew from a water-filled well and of the college students who rescued the woman stuck on the railroad tracks are so incredible. It is simply not in our DNA to forget ourselves and risk everything for a stranger. Simply knowing in our minds what the right thing to do is does not mean we can do it. If we are going to be Good Samaritans, then this will mean more than a change of mind. It will take a change of heart. And that's what this parable is about: changing our hearts.

This may be the point of Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan. What the lawyer discovered-and what we discover, too-is that we cannot stand on the sidelines and try to figure out how to be good, defining our terms-is this person my neighbor or not or pondering continuously what is it we have to *do* to inherit eternal life. God's love and God's promise of eternal life is not something to be earned, it is already freely given. And we are invited to live into it. And if we strive to live into this wonderful gift then we will choose to live continually with open arms and with open hearts, filled with love, kindness, care, compassion and mercy toward one another and our neighbor, toward any and everyone. We will *see* and *feel* the needs of others instead of always turning inwardly and respond in kind. "To love God is to love neighbor is to love God."

"Go and do likewise." AMEN.