

**GO AND DO THE SAME**  
Luke 10:25-37

Kelly Boyte Brill  
Avon Lake UCC  
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Jesus' parables are some of the most masterful stories ever told. Many of them rely on the element of surprise. A shepherd loses one sheep out of 99. What does he do? Everyone listening to Jesus has the same thought. "You shrug it off. These things happen. You count it as loss. You don't cry over spilt goat milk, right?" They're people who know about sheep. They know that sometimes a sheep will fall into a ravine and die. Sometimes a sheep will be attacked by a wolf. These things happen. But then Jesus says, "What does the good shepherd do? The good shepherd leaves behind the 99 to search out the one who is lost." What? ! No one does that. Jesus has their attention and now he says, "That's how much God loves each one of you." Wow.

Or he tells about a son who runs away from home with a whole bunch of Mom and Dad's money. He becomes a disgrace. He drags the family name through the mud. He loses every dime. Then he comes trudging back, tail between his legs, just hoping that they'll let him sleep in the basement for a while. Everybody listening thinks, "Hmmm...I wonder what kind of lecture he'll get. Wonder how bad the punishment will be." Jesus has his audience in the palm of his hand. He says, "The father was so happy to see his long-lost son that he throws him a huge welcome home party!" Stunned silence, and then, "That's how wonderful God's grace and love and forgiveness can be."

The hard part for us in hearing Jesus' stories is that we can't recover that original sense of surprise. We've heard these stories, some of us, since we were in preschool Sunday School. Do any of you remember, as I do, these wonderful little Arch books that

are used to introduce Bible stories to children? It's almost impossible to re-hear the story with fresh ears. And the stories lose something without their element of surprise.

So it is with the parable of the Good Samaritan. In Jesus' day it was a story with the power not just to surprise but to shock. A man is beaten up, robbed, left for dead on the side of the road. That's not the shocking part; evidently incidents like that happened from time to time.

The first person to walk by is a priest. He sees the man, but he walks by him. In fact, he crosses to the other side of the road. Why? Maybe he's in a hurry. Maybe he's afraid that the robbers are still around.

A week or so ago I was meeting my friend Shawnthea for lunch downtown. I got off I-90 on the W. 25<sup>th</sup> Street exit. I reached the intersection of W. 25<sup>th</sup> and was in the left turn lane. The light was red. There was a man with a sign that said, "Hungry. Please help." He was standing right by my car window. I didn't give him any money. I didn't make eye contact with him. After a few seconds, the guy in the car behind me rolled down his window. The man approached the car behind me and I saw the two of them talking. I saw the driver hand over a bill. Why didn't I help? We're told that giving handouts isn't always the right thing to do. I was probably a bit afraid of rolling my window down. I understand the priest passing by to the other side.

The second person to walk by is a Levite, an assistant in the Temple. He sees the man in the ditch. He thinks, "What might happen to me if I stop to help this man?" I might get dirty, I might get involved with something complicated, I might be late to where I'm going. He thinks of himself, and so he keeps going. To alleviate guilt, he walks by on the other side of the road.

As Jesus is telling this story, people are surprised that neither the priest nor the Levite stopped to help the man. You may be surprised that I didn't give money to the guy on West 25<sup>th</sup> St.

They're waiting for what comes next. In storytelling, things often come in threes. Which good Jew will be the savior, the embodiment and the epitome of what it means to be a neighbor? They know it's coming. And then Jesus says the word, "Samaritan." A Samaritan is the hero of this parable. A Samaritan is lifted up as a role model, one to emulate. He quite literally goes out of his way to help the victim. He's moved with pity. The Samaritan bandages the victim's wounds, he puts him on his own animal, takes him to an inn, and pays for his care. He holds nothing back.

For a Jew in Jesus' day, there was no worse enemy than a Samaritan. A Samaritan was like an untouchable, someone unclean, impure, an outcast. Jesus' listeners would have been shocked. Perhaps horrified. Offended.

If we were to put the story into our time and place, who would you least likely hold up as a good example? If I said, "a Muslim extremist stopped and helped the man", you start to get the idea. You begin to understand how Jesus' original audience reacted.

Jesus calls our attention to the "who" and to the "what" of this story. The "who" is the neighbor. He uses the most outrageous example possible to show that his reach extends to everyone. Which means that God's reach extends to everyone. There is no one God does not seek to redeem. There is not one sheep God willingly lets run away. God will search out every single person who leaves the fold. In our hymnal there's a hymn with lyrics that begin, "There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea..."

This parable is prompted by a question, “Who’s my neighbor? I know I’m supposed to love my neighbor, but Jesus, could you be a bit more specific? I’d especially like to know which people I DON’T have to love.”

There is no one who is not our neighbor. That’s the WHO.

The WHAT is neighborliness. It’s costly, it’s risky, it’s inconvenient. Neighborliness does not ask, “What will happen to me if I don’t help?” Neighborliness asks, “What will happen to this person if I don’t get involved?” It means looking out for one another. It’s spending the night on an air mattress in the church during Family Promise week because there are people in our community who are homeless. It’s taking a week’s vacation to chaperone a mission trip so that our youth can learn the meaning of service. It’s visiting in the nursing home even if it may make you feel slightly depressed. It’s giving away your most precious resources – your time and your money.

The sad truth is that many churches are dying. All of the mainline denominations – UCC, United Methodist, Presbyterian – are losing members. Nationwide, church attendance is down. When I talk to other ministers and read church literature, it’s easy to become depressed. And sometimes I find myself wondering, “What good does the church do in the world? What is our purpose in this time and place?” And just in the past month – these answers have come to me.

Let me share with you a few of the roles our church plays behind the scenes.

In September we hosted a wedding for a couple who are active members of the First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lorain – the church that was consumed by fire two years ago. It was such a joy to be neighborly, and for this couple – and their pastor – to participate in a church wedding in our sanctuary.

Not even two weeks ago a woman walked into the church in the middle of the day, in the middle of the week. “I’m a Christian,” she said, “who hasn’t had a church home in 25 years. I believe God’s telling me it’s time to come back to church.” She came to Bible Study last week and one of our members said, “You’ve come to the right place.” It may or may not be the right church home for her – I hope it is – but we are certainly a safe harbor for now as she seeks out her path.

During the middle of the presidential debate last Sunday night, I received an email from one of our younger members. She was also watching the debate. “Kelly, how do you know who to believe and for whom to vote?” I was so humbled that she sought out the church to help her make this important moral decision. I’m not going to tell her who to vote for, but she and I are meeting, and we’ll talk about the general criteria and faithful decision making.

Like most of you, our staff and church leaders have been deeply concerned about the opiate crisis which is worse in Lorain and Cuyahoga Counties than almost anywhere else in the nation. We’ve been to meetings, we know that we all need to clean out our medicine cabinets and not leave prescription painkillers around, but what else – what more – can we do? An article last week had a new take on things. It said, “Many people turn to painkillers not because of physical pain but because of an emptiness in their lives. Spiritual leaders need to help lead people towards meaning and purpose and community.”

That is the purpose of the church.

Thank you so much for your support of this church’s mission which is to be a place where we grow people to serve God and others. We are always striving to be the best neighbors we can be.