

Following this sermon there is an e mail I received from Edith White, a missionary who is supported by some members of our church. Please take time to read about her inspiring and challenging work.

Frank

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
7/15/07
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

Luke 10:25-37 (NRSV)

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" [26] He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" [27] He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." [28] And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

[29] But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" [30] Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. [31] Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. [32] So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. [33] But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. [34] He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. [35] The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' [36] Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" [37] He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

A COMMUNITY OF HEROES

This past week a plane crashed into several homes. An off duty fireman who didn't have the proper equipment charged into one of those flaming houses. He saved several lives and continued to give emergency medical aid to one of the victims, even though he was also injured by his rescue efforts.

Why did he do it? Why was this man willing to risk his life to save people he didn't know? Over the years I've seen television interviews of other public servants who have done similar acts, and most of these "heroes" give the same answer.

Why did you do it? "That's what we were trained to do. That's who we are. That's what it means to be a public servant. If a person is in need, then we will risk our lives to save them."

There's almost an "of course we did that" attitude among these public servants. "What else would we do? This is our job." Their community is defined by this extraordinary willingness to risk their lives to save others.

I wonder. How do we define the community of faith? What does it mean to live as God would have us live? Or, to ask the question as the lawyer asked it long ago, "How can we inherit eternal life?"

The Scripture tells us that this leader asked that question in order to test Jesus. But, it seems to me that we are all tested by that question. How can we live a life that is pleasing to God?

DOING THE WORD

In a sense the answer to that question is easy. We have the Ten Commandments, and they conveniently summarize the Law of God. And those commandments can be broken down into two sections. One section deals with our relationship to God, and the other section deals with our relationship to our fellow men and women.

When Jesus asked the lawyer how he would answer that test question, the lawyer had no trouble coming up with an answer. He spouts the correct answer like some of us say the Lord's Prayer or the Apostle's Creed ... almost without reflection or thought.

What is the most important rule of faith and practice? "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus replied, “That’s the right answer. If you do this you will live.” But, as we all know, giving the right answer will not always mean that you will do the right thing.

For example, many of us pray each week “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” But, in our hearts we often harbor a grudge toward someone and the familiar prayer does not bring us the hope that it should. Our lives are not what they could be because we are dominated by guilt or a desire for revenge. We say forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, but we don’t do it. And doing it is the key.

We often say one thing, but we do something else. It’s like some parents tell their children, “Do what I say do; don’t do what I do.” But, it doesn’t work that way. Children learn what they live, and according to this passage, we are what we do.

Our life together is defined by our actions. What’s that old saying? “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” And the road to heaven, according to Jesus, is paved with loving actions toward neighbors in need.

LOOKING FOR A LOOPHOLE

The trouble with this passage is that it is too clear and too specific. There is very little wiggle room. If you want to love God, love your neighbor. Case closed. But, the religious lawyer, being the clever theologian and lawyer that he was, was able to find a little wiggle room. He wanted to find a way to justify himself, to excuse his less than stellar behavior.

In any legal document common terms are often defined in intricate and limited ways. This has the effect of turning something that is seemingly simple and straightforward into something that is complex and complicated. Thus, lawyers are needed to interpret the contract, and theological “experts” are needed to interpret the Bible.

But, the lawyer didn’t get what he wanted. Instead of a technical definition of the word neighbor, the lawyer got the story of the Good Samaritan. And the gist of that story, as most of us already know is that a neighbor is anyone who happens to be on our path and has a need.

This past week I read a more modern story about how we attempt to justify and excuse our less than Christian behavior. It was a story about Clarence Jordan. Clarence, as some of you might remember, founded Koinonia Farm, an interracial experiment in communal Christian living just outside of Americus, Georgia.

That was certainly not what everyone thought Clarence would do. He grew up in a prosperous family and received a traditional theological education (a Ph.D. in New Testament Greek from the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky). He was known for his brilliance as a writer and was on his way to becoming a professor.

But, instead, he left the seminary and established this interracial community in segregated Georgia in the mid-1950s. It was not well received. The Southern Baptist congregation eventually excluded the whole Koinonia Community. The charges leveled against them read, "Said members ... have persisted in holding services where both white and colored attend together."

This "excommunication" was followed by vandalism, cross burning, legal pressures, beatings, bombings, a comprehensive economic boycott, and shootings by snipers who aimed at any available target on the commune. Clarence turned to his brother, attorney Robert Jordan, for legal counsel and asked him to become legal representative of the Koinonia Community.

Robert, who later became a Georgia state senator and a justice of the Georgia State Supreme Court, declined. He said, "Clarence, I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represented you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I've got."

Clarence replied, "We might lose everything too, Bob."
Bob replied, "It's different for you."

And Clarence said,
"Why is it different? I remember, it seems to me, that you and I joined the church the same Sunday as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me about the same question he did you. He asked me, 'Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?'"

And I said 'Yes.' What did you say?"

Bob stammered, "I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point."

And Clarence replied, "Could that point by any chance be ... the cross?"

Bob said, "That's right. I follow him to the cross, but not on the cross. I'm not getting myself crucified."

Clarence retorted, "Then I don't believe you're a disciple of Jesus. You're an admirer of Jesus but not a disciple. I think you ought to go back to the church where you belong and tell them that you're an admirer and not a disciple."

Bob said indignantly, "Well if everyone who felt like I do did, then we wouldn't have a church, would we?"

And Clarence replied, "The question is do you have a church?"

THE COURAGE OF OUR CONVICTIONS

And that's the hard question that we need to ask as well. Do we have a church? Are we disciples of Jesus or are we just admirers of Jesus?

I think that the questions we ask in the church are often more theoretical than practical. You know the kind of questions I mean. "What are the four spiritual laws and should we have a fifth one? Should we or should we not say 'descended into hell' when we repeat the creed?"

Now, there may be some validity in asking some of those questions. But, often we use our theological nitpicking to avoid the really important questions, questions like, "What is God calling us to do today? How should we live in response to the call of Christ?"

These questions require more than knowledge to answer. They require courage. They require a community that is willing to take risks in the name of Christ.

And it's at this point that everyone starts backpedaling. Like Clarence's brother we think its okay to follow Jesus up to a point. And that point is

often a cross. Jesus can take up a cross if he likes, but we're not about to take up a cross and follow him. It's impractical. It's dangerous. It's foolhardy. Why, we could lose everything following Jesus.

Someone in our Bible study said that the story of the Good Samaritan is too familiar. How could I ever find something new to say about it?

Well, the problem is not saying something new about this familiar parable. The real challenge is getting us to take the parable to heart, to have the courage to stop and have compassion on that person in the middle of our road who is in dire need.

Some years ago a famous experiment was conducted with seminary students. Researchers gathered a group of ministry students in a classroom and told them that each of them had an assignment. Their assignment was to record a talk about the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

The thing was, the recordings were going to be done on a building on the other side of the campus, and because of a tight schedule they needed to hurry to that building.

Unbeknownst to the students, on the path to the other building the researchers had planted an actor to play the part of a man in distress, slumped in an alley, coughing and suffering. The students were going to make a presentation about the Good Samaritan. But, what would happen, the researchers wondered, when they actually encountered a man in need?

Would they be Good Samaritans? Well, no, as a matter of fact, they were not. Almost all of them rushed past the hurting man. One student even stepped over the man's body as he hurried to teach about the Parable of the Good Samaritan!

Apparently things today are not all that different from Jesus' day. Orthodox theology and religious credentials are no guarantee that a person will be compassionate when the opportunity presents itself.

The famous theologian, Karl Barth was in a discussion with his colleagues about sin. Several people were asked to give their definitions and then they

turned to Barth and asked, “And what about you? How would you define sin?”

And Barth replied with tongue firmly in cheek, “A definition of sin is a Ph.D. in ethics.” He was saying that sometimes our ethical deliberations can just be a smart way of avoiding righteous action. Sometimes sin can be defined as piously praying and thinking about the faith but never acting upon those beliefs, never doing what faith requires.

I’m not impressed with the argument that this kind of discipleship is too demanding or too impractical. If firefighters and policemen can build a community based upon a willingness to risk their lives for a stranger in need, then we can do it too. It’s not a matter of right theology. It’s a matter of courage.

Do we have the courage to follow Jesus? Do we have the courage to show compassion on those who are beaten and broken on the dangerous road? Or do we pass by on the other side, thinking that we have more important duties to attend to?

Those are the questions that this parable asks, and those questions are just as relevant today as they were when Jesus first asked them.

REASONS TO WALK BY

In the ancient religious hierarchy of Israel there were three orders: the high priest, the priest and the Levites. The priests were responsible for making sacrifices and the Levites were responsible for the care of the sacred building ... washing the sacred vessels, preparing the lamps and arranging for the sacred music. People from the various families took turns doing this, and it was a rare honor to be able to serve in the temple.

And it may be that the priest and the Levite were on their way to serve in this rare and holy way. It was the opportunity of a lifetime. And as they walk along this path they see a man broken and bleeding. Is he dead? They can’t know for sure. And if he is dead, and they touch him, they will be ritually unclean for a week ... and will lose this rare opportunity to serve in the holy temple.

More than that, the road to Jericho was a notorious hiding place for bandits. Perhaps this man lying beside the road was a ruse. Maybe he wasn't injured at all. If they were to stop and help, they might be robbed by the man and his confederates.

They can't take the chance. The best thing, the prudent thing is to cross the road and walk by on the other side.

Isn't that the argument often used in the church? Sometimes we walk to the other side of the road when a need arise because we don't want anyone to be upset. We want to avoid controversy so that our worship services will be full, and we will enjoy the favor of the people.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

But, then a Samaritan comes down the road. We say that he is the Good Samaritan because we know how the story ends. But, they would have never said that in Jesus' day. Good and Samaritan were contradictory terms.

If Jesus were doing this parable today he might call it the parable of the Good Guy from Al Qaeda. There are no good guys in Al Qaeda you say? That's precisely my point. And that's how they would have looked at Samaritans in Jesus' day.

The Samaritans didn't worship at the temple in Jerusalem. They had their own temple on Mt. Gerazim in Samaria. And so these Samaritans didn't know the right, orthodox answers when it came to the faith. They had opposed the rebuilding of the temple. They had even attacked pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem to worship. They were not to be trusted. They were dangerous.

But, the Samaritan in Jesus' story was able to do the right thing despite his unorthodox theology. He stopped, cleaned and bound up the man's wounds. He walked to the nearest inn as the man rode on his donkey. He paid for his lodging, and made sure that any future needs would be satisfied ... leaving the equivalent of two days wages with the innkeeper.

He did the right thing. And that made all the difference.

Sometimes people with impeccable theology do the most despicable things. And sometimes people with questionable theology do the right thing.

So the question becomes which is more important? Is it more important to make an “A” on your theology exam or do the right thing when the time of testing comes? Jesus votes for doing the right thing. And even the lawyer had to vote that way as well.

Jesus asked at the end of his parable,
“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

And the lawyer said,
“The one who showed him mercy.” (Notice that the lawyer still can’t quite say the word Samaritan and mercy in the same sentence.)

But, the parable has done its work. He now sees the world in a different way.

And then the lawyer who wished to test Jesus is himself tested. Jesus tells him, “Go and do likewise.”

GO AND DO

Instead of trying to justify himself or put others to the test, the lawyer is challenged to just go and do God’s will. The tense of the imperative indicates habitual practice. In other words, Jesus was telling the lawyer to make a habit of doing what the Samaritan did. He was to do what love required at every opportunity.

Jesus tells us in this passage that eternal life is not about embracing a certain philosophy or even believing a particular set of doctrines. Eternal life begins here and now when we find the courage to be compassionate to the one lying broken and bleeding along the dangerous road.

Helping others can be a dangerous thing to do. Some might take advantage of our compassion. Some might even be willing to harm us. But, what

happens to us if our fears keep us from reaching out? What if we always pass by on the other side because it is the prudent thing to do?

If we never take the risk of compassion, if we never find the courage to reach out to the one in need, we become detached from life itself. The faith we profess is no longer alive and vital.

The biblical book of James puts it bluntly, “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.” (James 2:26) In other words, though it is dangerous to stop and help, it is even more dangerous to constantly pass on by. If we constantly pass by the neighbor in need, we can lose our very soul.

A CONCRETE EXAMPLE

I was talking with my wife about this week’s sermon, and she challenged me to be more practical in my application. She said, “You need to give them something concrete that they can actually do today.”

I thought to myself, “She’s right of course, but what can I say? Who can predict when someone will need us beside the dangerous road? You just have to wait for the opportunity.”

And then yesterday morning I got an e mail from one of missionaries, Edith White. The full text of her e mail and a picture is posted on the bulletin board, but I wanted to summarize some of what she wrote.

Edith’s days are filled with people begging for help. Some are promising students that need money for school. Many need medical care that is beyond their meager means, and some even die for lack of medical care. Read her stories on the bulletin board. They are guaranteed to give you a glimpse into how other people live.

Edith is the epitome of the Good Samaritan. She stops and gives all that she has. But, sometimes she has nothing to give but her compassion. She wrote,

“They appreciate the fact that I care, but can’t understand why I can’t or won’t help them. Sometimes I refuse to go out to see them when I know I

can't do anything. Sometimes I am brusque with them and find myself thinking, 'How many times do I have to tell you that there is nothing today? If you're hungry or sick I'm sorry. But, today there is nothing.'

Edith seems almost reluctant to ask for much for her own needs ... even though her missionary work is totally funded by donations. But, yesterday she asked for money for the many people she finds broken and bleeding along the dangerous road. She wrote,

“\$15.00 doesn't sound like much, does it? But, in the course of a day, if you even have just 20 people come by with a need you're up to \$300. And in a month you need \$9,000 just for helping people during that month. Of course some people don't need quite that much, but others, those doing a field or needing an operation for example, need much, much more. You can see why there are many days when there is nothing to give!”

I know that some of you are helping Edith with her ministry in Africa, and perhaps more of you might be inspired to help when you read her e mail.

But, the work of the Good Samaritan doesn't always happen far away in exotic and impoverished lands. There are also many opportunities for us to bind up wounded fellow travelers here and now.

Don't take this parable too literally. It's not just about helping people who have been robbed and beaten. People are broken and bloodied by many things in life ... things like divorce, sickness, sorrow and abuse. In fact I know that there are many broken people in this very room.

Perhaps God is calling you to reach out and help one of them or some other neighbor in need. Don't wait. Don't think about it. Just go and do it.

Strangely enough, when we go and do what faith requires, we find that our faith is strengthened.

I know. It can be frightening. But, remember that we are disciples of Jesus. It is Jesus who has sent us down this road, and it is Jesus who will lead us home.

Amen.

Letter from Edith White 7/14/07

Tuesday, July 10th, 2007

"Ah ha!," I said to myself. "Today I will get up early and start working, at last, on an update e-mail to send to friends back in the U.S. I'll get a chunk done before anyone comes to see me."

Before I was finished dressing, and definitely before I could eat any breakfast, someone was knocking at my door and calling, "Mama! Mama!". The voice sounded familiar, and I chose not to ignore it. (Sometimes I simply refuse to appear until I'm ready.) It was Boura?ma (Boo-RYE-ma). Boura?ma is a boy from an extremely poor family. I know the mother best. She often comes for help because her children are often sick. As a matter of fact, I remember how very sick Boura?ma was two years ago. His belly was distended to a dangerous extent as a result of the work of various parasites and worms. He was in the hospital quite a long time.

I found out just recently that he is an excellent student and is eager to learn. So, when he asked for workbooks to study from over the "summer" vacation, I got them for him. Then he said that his teacher was willing to give him special tutoring sessions. The hope was that he could do enough of 3rd grade this "summer" that next year he could move on into 4th grade! I said I wanted to meet the teacher before I committed to anything. So here was Boura?ma, bright and early this morning! He just couldn't wait to get something worked out so that he could get going on his summer learning. He had brought his teacher. We had a very nice meeting! I will try somehow to scrape together the \$10.00 a month to pay the teacher. (If I say "scrape", it is only because there are so many other needs and demands! Deciding whom to help and with how much is always a juggling act.)

In the meeting with the teacher I found out some things I hadn't known or thought about in connection with Boura?ma. He looks like he is about 11, but he is in fact 17 or 18. Boys here don't always look anywhere near as old as they are for quite a while. While he was in the hospital with the problem I mentioned above, a doctor took an

interest in him. He asked Boura?ma if he went to school. Boura?ma explained that his job was to follow and watch over the herds of cattle the family was responsible for. (His ethnic group, the Fulani, are traditionally nomadic cattle herders, although Boura?ma's clan seems fairly sedentary.) The doctor helped him start going to school.

So, that was how the day began. As they left, I decided that meeting the teacher and helping Boura?ma had definitely been worth skipping breakfast for. (But I'd just as soon not rush into every day before I'm ready! One needs to save a little personal space just for sanity! "Could you please just wait until I've combed my hair?")

As I let them out of the gate, I was met by a number of other people who had come with various needs. In fact, some of them had, during our conversation, tried to get my attention over the wall. I tried to tell them to go and see my helpers over at the church, that I had no money for them here. They hung on, though.

1. A girl who has a crippled arm and who doesn't speak clearly. We always have big smiles and handshakes for each other. I do what I can. She and her mother were hungry. There wasn't enough food or money in their household.

2. Pobime (poh-BEEM), an energetic and enterprising little woman, who is quite vociferous in expressing her needs. She does a lot with the little we give her. Today her problem was hunger, too. She had taken some corn to the mill to be ground into flour to make their staple porridge. It was ground, but she didn't have the money to pay for the grinding, so there it sat.

3. An older man wanted money to buy some Ibuprofen. He really has a more extensive prescription from the doctor at the hospital, but we haven't been able to come up with the \$15.00 that would enable him to pay for it. He hoped we could at least get him a little Ibuprofen.*

4. and 5. Two older widows who were hungry and not able to do much for themselves.

6. A younger man with at least 6 kids who wants to plant corn so he will have something for them to eat this coming year. He needs help with the cost of plowing and to pay for fertilizer.

7. A young man who would like to have a piece of cloth to use as a sheet, since the nights are cooler now, and there are mosquitoes.

The question I ask myself is how long I should spend listening to people and commiserating with them when I know that at that time I don't have any money to help them with. They appreciate the fact that I care, it seems, but can't understand why I can't or won't help them. Sometimes I refuse to go out to see them when I know I can't do anything. Sometimes I am brusque with them and find myself thinking, "How many times do I have to tell you that there is nothing today? I know you're hungry or sick. I'm sorry. But today there is nothing!" Yet, if I take the time to listen to them compassionately, it seems to help them in some way. And I feel better about having taken the time to show that I do care about them. That's what one "voice" tells me to do. All the while, of course, in the back of my mind is another little voice screaming, "You're not getting that letter written to the people in the U.S. You're not getting that report written!" Which voice do I listen to?

Into this group of people came Sottima (SOH-tee-mah), a slim young man with big glasses. A couple of days ago, I had helped him and his wife get their thirteen-month old to the dispensary (government clinic). He had a very high fever. My helpers and I managed to get the money together for the prescription the clinic gave him. Today, though, Sottima stood quietly at the wall.

"The baby is gone," he said. "Gone?"

"Yes, he had a very bad night; he was so thirsty and sometimes he would shake a lot. We borrowed some money and took him to the clinic this morning early for the tests they wanted to do on him. But he died right there, before they even opened the clinic."

At this point there wasn't a lot I could do. He said that family members had been called in from the fields and they would bury the baby shortly. I felt that the least I could do was to go to the burial. When we got there, the men of the family and some friends were digging a grave behind the houses of the compound at the foot of a large tree. This was no pristine, manicured cemetery; it was just "home." Sottima took me into one of the little round "houses" where two women were keeping watch over the little body. The baby was lying on a plastic mat and was wrapped loosely in everyday cloth. That's what he would be buried in, not in a coffin. The father was happy to have me pray with him there. Then I went out and sat with the young mother. She

seemed to be all alone in her grief. We sat quietly on a large tire under a shade tree until the baby was carried to the grave. She and the other women did not watch as the baby was laid in the grave, but after it had been partly covered with dirt, they had her come and express a few drops of milk from her breast into the grave. Then they carefully filled in the rest of the dirt and formed a mound over it with what was left. They brushed the mound with some leafy branches, which they then left lying on top of the mound. Everyone then began going quietly away. A couple of neighbors and friends hung back and said, "Don't you want to pray?" I said it depended on the family. The parents wanted me to, so most people came back. I tried to pray in a way that would reach both heaven and the hearers around me with their needs, both physical and spiritual. Other than that there was no ceremony. I asked if they had considered having a pastor or priest come. Sottima said it would have cost more and involved more complications than they felt they could bear.

Sooooo... that was my morning. Did I make the right choices? Should I have shut myself off and gotten overdue government reports written, or finished an update to people back in my home country, or straightened up my house?

After all, today I had no funds in the house to help anyone with, and these other things really need to be done. So often, though, when I do try to shut myself off, something comes up anyway that I really ought not or cannot ignore! Do I just relax and "go with the flow," or do I set a schedule and expect people with their sorrows, sickness, hunger, and other needs to conform to it? How can you "schedule" the need to help a sick baby?

For those who pray, do pray for wisdom and true compassion and love on my part. I'd also like to get a lot more sleep. And a magic wand to get reports and other things done quickly would be most welcome.

Today I've written to you mostly about life with people around me. I assure you I am still involved in literacy work. In another message I'll have to tell you about going out to visit classes in villages and about a course and a forum I was on staff for. It has been an interesting season.

All God's very best to you,
Edith White

*\$15.00 doesn't sound like much, does it? But in the course of a day, if you even have just 20 people who come by with a need for \$15.00, you're up to \$300.00 a day. Multiply that by 30 days in a month and you discover you need \$9000.00 just for helping people during the month. Of course, some people don't need quite that much, but others, those doing a field or needing an operation, for example, need much, much more. You can see why there are many days when there is nothing to give!
