

## “ENTERING ANOTHER’S STORY”

Luke 10:25-37

My grandfather, Emil Weis, loved to tell me stories. I have many cherished memories of sitting on his lap, hearing tall tales of the Incredible and Unbelievable. Through his storytelling, the canal beside his home in Florida became a setting for eerie sea monsters and marauding pirates. “Ahoy, Mate,” I can still hear him saying with a wink and a grin. Nearby woods became a mythical habitat for strange creatures: a mischievous monkey named Joe; an elderly lion named Leo.

Eventually, regrettably, I grew too big for grandpa’s knees and too old for grandpa’s tall tales. I learned that monkeys did not speak, that geriatric lions did not wear dentures. Still, his storytelling was an important part of my childhood development. By drawing me into his stories, he helped distract me from the pain of my parent’s divorce.

There are many types of stories: biographical and historical, factual and fictional, westerns, romance, fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Yet, whatever the genre, a story is always most meaningful when we read ourselves into it; when we identify with the setting, dialogue, plot, and especially the predicaments of the characters. Have you ever read a novel you could not put down? Have you ever watched a movie you wished would never end—the last to leave the theatre, enduring the scrolling credits for just one more scene, one more embrace, one more scare. If so, you entered the story.

Decades ago, my dear friend Jean and I went to see the movie *Rocky*, starring Sylvester Stallone. Jean was not a boxing fan, and expected nothing more from the movie than disinterest and disgust. But then a strange thing happened. During the final climactic scene, when Rocky was pummeled, bloodied, and all but beaten—knocked down repeatedly, yet always staggering to his feet to box on—I glanced at Jean and was astonished to see her jabbing, feinting, and wincing along with Rocky. What had happened? She had entered the story. An exchange had taken place. In a sense, Jean was now on the theatre screen, and Rocky was sitting next to me spilling buttered popcorn.

Entering another’s story. But what if the story is fact instead of fiction? What if that story is another human life? After all, don’t we often ask, “So, what’s your story?” This is because every life is a story, with a beginning and ending; twists, turns, conflicts, and a variety of characters.

Such stories may not be on the New York Times best-seller list. Their titles may sound more mundane than magnificent. The story of a man lying forgotten in a nursing home. The story of a woman who lost her husband of fifty years. The story of a homeless beggar on a park bench. The story of divorce, foreclosure, illness, or

ingratitude. But true-to-life stories nonetheless. How willing are we to enter these stories? How willing are we to get involved? How willing are we to stop and help with the means we have? Or, like a certain priest and a certain Levite, do we prefer to pass by on the other side? These are the questions raised by a story Jesus once told; namely, the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*.

To understand this story, we must first know why Jesus told it. According to the text, an expert in the law approached Jesus to test him. The lawyer's motives may have been devious—that is, a desire to discredit Jesus. Or the lawyer may have been testing Christ's knowledge of the Mosaic Law, thinking he, the lawyer, was the expert and Jesus of Nazareth was the novice; not realizing that he was questioning the long-awaited Messiah.

But along with the lawyer's motives, the content of his question is also important. He began by asking, **“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”** Luke 10:25. Not surprisingly, the lawyer's approach to salvation was a LEGAL one, a case based on his own merits and good deeds before Almighty God. “What must I do to save myself? Be nice? Keep the Ten Commandments? Watch my language? Help the poor? Tithe? Donate to charitable causes? Perform community service? Provide relief to some half-dead man in the middle of the road? What?”

In reality, the LEGAL approach to salvation is the approach of all manmade religions, regardless of when they've existed or what they've been called; whether polytheism or humanism; whether the teachings of Mormonism or Islam, Christian Science or Jehovah's Witnesses. Only Christianity, as taught by the Bible, insists that Man is not saved by his own merits or works, but by the doing, dying, and rising of Jesus Christ. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians: **“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast,”** Ephesians 2:8-9.

**“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”** How did Jesus answer the lawyer's question? And did His answer surprise you? Jesus didn't say, “Mr. Lawyer, that is the most ridiculous I've ever heard. You can't save yourself. You can't keep the commandments perfectly. Instead, you must believe in Me as your Lord and Savior.” Jesus did not say these things, though they were true and He certainly could have. Why not? Because a person who thinks he can save himself, who believes he can love both God and neighbor perfectly, will not see the need for a Savior. He must first be brought to the knowledge of his own sinfulness.

This is precisely why Jesus directed the lawyer back to the very law of God he professed to keep: loving the Lord God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his strength; and loving his neighbor as himself. **“You have answered correctly,”** said Jesus. **“Do this and you will live,”** Luke 10:28. Significantly, the verb **“do this”** is in the present tense, meaning “do this, always do this, never fail at this.”

And here the lawyer's self-defense began to unravel. He no doubt remembered people he had not loved or care for—perhaps the despised tax collector or the hated Samaritan or the unwelcome Gentile. Surely God did not expect him to love such undesirables as these. So, seeking to justify himself, the lawyer looked for a legal loophole. He asked, “**And who is my neighbor?**” Luke 10:29. In response, Jesus told the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*. Let's briefly enter the story.

Luke 10:30, “**A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half-dead.**” The road from Jerusalem to Jericho stretched seventeen miles, dropping more than 3,300 feet in elevation as it cut through the rock and desolation of the Judean Wilderness. People who traveled this road did so at their own peril. The road was so dangerous, so notorious for ambushes and robberies, that even in Christ's day it was called “The Highway of Blood.”

For the victim in this story, that day may have started like any other. He was certainly aware of the dangers of the road, but may have thought: “What are the odds of anything bad happening to me?” How many of us could tell stories that begin with a similar assumption? “I never expected to get cancer. I never expected to lose my job. I never expect to go through a divorce. I never expected to be injured in an automobile accident or to lose a loved one or to spend so many years alone or to receive so little appreciation from people for whom I've done so much.”

In Greek, the words “**they beat him**” in Luke 10:30 are more literally “**and they laid into him.**” Graphic. In other words, the robbers savagely beat the man; punched, kicked, stomped, gouged, perhaps laughing while they did so. Then they went away, leaving the man half-dead.

Luke 10:31-32, “**A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.**” I know. You and I are already thinking about the despicable actions of the priest and Levite—already thinking: “If I had been traveling that road that day; if I had seen the victim lying beaten, bleeding, and half-dead, I would have stopped and rendered assistance.”

But let's not pass too hastily over the first words of these two verses: “**A priest happened to be going down the same road.**” Happened. From our perspective, encounters with other people may seem as if by chance. But is there really room for chance or coincidence within the providence of God?

Remember that passenger who sat next to you on the airplane? Remember that gaunt man on the park bench with his shoulders slumped and his head in his hands? Remember that distraught coworker; and the stranger who visited church; and the deathly pale patient lying in a hospital bed? Were these encounters merely accidents,

or were they God-given opportunities to ENTER THE STORY of another human being?

We know what the priest and Levite did with their opportunities to help. Both refused to go near the victim. Both hurried past on the opposite side of the road. And as they passed the man lying in the road, bleeding and moaning, what were they thinking? Were their stomachs queasy with guilt? Were their consciences screaming? Were they, like the lawyer, looking for LEGAL loopholes to justify their actions?

We can almost hear their excuses, can't we? "Listen, I don't know this man. He's not my responsibility. I'm no doctor. Anyway, the man is likely dead; and if he isn't, will be soon. And if he is dead, according to the Law of Moses, just touching him would render me ceremonially unclean and unfit for duty in the temple for several days. So, by not helping this man I'm actually better serving God. Besides, this is a well-traveled road. Someone will be along soon enough. I'm certain of it. Someone. Soon."

Of course, Jesus could have made the priest and Levite in His story a farmer and shepherd, or a well-digger and tax collector, or a merchant and soldier. But He didn't. Instead, Jesus purposely chose two religious characters for His parable. Two men who served in God's temple. Two men trained in God's word. Two men who should have been the first to render assistance, but were instead the first to show indifference.

Interestingly, in verse 28, when Jesus tells the lawyer, "**You have answered correctly,**" the Greek word used is ORTHOS; the origin of our word orthodoxy. And this is significant. Have the right confession—a confession based fully on the word of God—is essential. But of what worth is the right confession without the right actions and without the right involvement?

It's always easier to pass by on the other side than to stop, get involved, and offer assistance. It's always easier to settle for handshakes and "please sign the guest register" than to visit people at home. It's always easier to pretend that we don't notice when fellow Christians no longer come to church; or easier to ignore the warning signs of a troubled marriage or addictions. "Not my problem. None of my business. Besides, someone else will come along soon enough. Someone. Soon. What if the Lord Jesus had displayed the same attitude toward us?"

As a young minister, I made countless excuses to avoid visiting a particularly difficult woman in a nursing home. "She's senile," I told myself. "She doesn't know who I am. She doesn't understand a single word I'm saying. When I enter her room, she grows agitated. She screams when I attempt to say the Lord's Prayer. Surely my time would be better spent elsewhere, with people who know me, welcome me, like me."

And yet, it occurred to me even then, as a young minister, that the priest and Levite in Christ's story may have used similar excuses. Truthfully, going to that nursing

home made me uncomfortable. Seeing the desperate looks on lonely faces made me uncomfortable. The unpleasant smells in the hallways made me uncomfortable. Entering the real-life story of that elderly woman made me uncomfortable. But at least I was orthodox. There is a reason why the Epistle of James states: **“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says,”** James 1:22.

When the priest and Levite had disappeared in a cloud of religious indifference, another traveler appeared on that bloody road. Luke 10:33-35, **“But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’ ”**

I wish I could have seen the look on the lawyer’s face at that moment. His jaw must have dropped. “A Samaritan? A Samaritan is the good guy in Your story, Jesus? No, that’s impossible. You must be joking. Please, anyone but a Samaritan.” To fully appreciate this ‘twist’ in Christ’s parable, we must remember the animosity that existed between Jews and Samaritans—how the Jews viewed Samaritans as half-breeds, low-lives, unlovable and un-savable.

And yet, it is the Samaritan in Christ’s story who proves to be the Scriptural example of **“love your neighbor as yourself.”** When the Samaritan sees the victim lying in the middle of the road, he doesn’t ask whether the man is a Jew or Samaritan, friend or foe. He doesn’t pass by on the other side. He doesn’t excuse himself on the pretext of better places to be, better things to do, and better people to help.

What does the Samaritan do? He **STOPS**. He gets **PERSONALLY INVOLVED**. He **RISKS**, not knowing if robbers are still in the area. He **ACTS**, binding up the victims wounds—‘traumas’ in Greek. He **INVESTS**, using his own clothes as bandages; his own wine as disinfectant and his own oil and balm; his own beast of burden to transport the victim; and his own money to pay for the victim’s recovery at a roadside inn. In other words, he **ENTERED THE STORY** of a complete stranger.

And the moral of the story? Luke 10:36-37, where Jesus asked: **“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”** The expert in the law replied, **“The one who had mercy on him.”** And Jesus said, **“Go and do likewise.”**

So then, who is my neighbor? He’s not only the person who lives next door or in the same neighborhood. He’s the person lying in the ditch. He’s the person beaten down and torn up by the difficulties of life. He’s the person who cannot help himself. He’s the person who can never repay. This person is my neighbor.

As I mentioned earlier, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, that “Highway of Blood,” stretched seventeen miles through dangerous, desolate terrain. But those seventeen miles can also represent the seventeen horrible blocks of an inner city neighborhood; or the seventeen stories of a rundown tenement; or the seventeen forgotten rooms along the hallways of a nursing home; or the seventeen years a devoted husband or wife cared for a spouse with Alzheimer’s.

What makes us willing to walk those seventeen miles, whatever they prove to be? What creates such compassion within us that we are willing to ENTER THE STORY of another human life? Surely, the answer is the compassionate way in which Jesus Christ entered the sad, dismal, doomed stories of our own lives; how He came to be with us and one of us instead of turning away from us; how He brought us—not from being half-dead in the road, but from being fully dead in transgressions—to true life that knows no limits; how His wounds, His traumas, brought us healing, hope, forgiveness, and eternal salvation.

The lawyer in today’s text asked Jesus, “**Who is my neighbor?**” But did you notice how Jesus changed that question? By the conclusion of the parable, the question is no longer “Who is my neighbor?” Rather, it’s “Who can I be a neighbor to?”

In the love and compassion of our Lord Jesus Christ, may we “**go and do likewise.**”