



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone

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“Go and Do Likewise!” Luke 10:25-37

This is not the sermon I planned to give today. We’ll get to it, but first, I need to embarrass myself by confessing sins and mistakes that have cost me a relationship I valued here in our church. I’m doing this to perhaps help some of you “go to school” on my errors, so you won’t make the mess I’ve made.

For me the biggest problem was, email. I got an email from this couple, and I was shocked at its content. It was a total surprise, and it contained what seemed like a questioning of my motives. I don’t handle that kind of thing very well.

First, the email. Did you know that only 7% of our communication is carried by our words? I’m struggling to write my doctoral paper of 130 pages by Thursday. I am immersed in words. So I guess I’d forgotten how weak words are. By comparison, when you and I talk together, we get 93% more information; we get vocal tone, and we get body language, and both are huge for us to understand each other. Email (or letters or telegrams) are one-way communications limited to words.

What do people do when they are deprived of information? We fill in the gaps. We make up stuff about the other person’s meanings or intentions. We have no way of checking that out with the other person, so we make it up, and that is highly controlled by what is going on with us emotionally at the moment, and by our character. And boy, did I screw this up.

I took what seemed like a criticism of my motives in what I admit was a risky situation, and I RAN with that perception. *WELL, if they’re questioning my motives, then that puts them in a certain narrow category I keep for critical people*, I thought. I had very little reason to make that jump; I’m very fond of these folks, they’ve been in our home for dinner, and that’s pretty rare. I felt wounded, and I was about to create a disaster.

This is especially embarrassing for me because I think of myself—and I try in truth to be—*very* tuned in to relationships. Compared to people in my family, I am “Mr. Relationship”. But not this time. So, I’m sorry. I let you down in this case. I damaged beyond repair, it seems, a friendship I valued. In my haste, and in agreeing to use email, I pretty much doomed myself and this couple to a painful end. I never heard their pain through the email; I only perceived anger and attack. My clumsy efforts at explaining became—apparently, on their end—nothing more than a defensive continual attack from me. Now, as they said in a phone message on my machine (again, one-way communication, right?), it’s “too little, too late”. I’d stopped communicating with them and tried to work through intermediaries for weeks to earn a face-to-face meeting; this couple saw that as “silence from me”, shutting them out. At least, with the phone message last night, I heard the “vocal tone”, and the pain in his voice was clear. They wanted nothing more to do with me, for I had become a source of nothing but pain for them, and

they wanted to seal that off. So I cannot repair damage; it's done. They're done. It's humiliating to see the damage I've caused, "because I only had the best of intentions". Don't we all?

So, I am sorry, especially for the pain I've caused them. They have been hurt by at least one church before, and now they feel I've attacked them very personally, too. I may have caused them to turn away from the great things healthy churches can offer; who wants to keep getting hurt?

What are the lessons here? For me, so far (and God may have more to teach me), #1 is, "Don't use email for emotional messages." Period. So that's now my policy.

#2 for me is, "slow down". That has two aspects. First, "slow down in replying." (If I'd followed lesson #1, I think this would not have been such a problem, but I'd already broken through that fence.) Once I got started on this discussion *and soon argument* over email, the exchanges were rapid and increasingly toxic. So, "slow down" has that application for me.

But there is another "slow down" application for me – I guess I should call that "lesson #3. I am running on fumes these days—far too much work, which I often take on because of the hope of accomplishing good things. Yesterday was my first day off in two weeks because of meetings and hospital visits, which really spiked this month. When I get tired and stressed, I retreat to "thinking" and "intuition" modes where I am strongest, and I retreat further from "feeling" and "physical evidence" modes of living. Like many men, under stress I live more and more in my head, and less and less in my heart; I become even less sensitive to the feelings of others. (A lot of women are nodding their heads right now. "Seen that one," you gals are saying.)

I've been stressed for so long I stopped noticing it; I've accepted stressed-out as my new normal – sucked it up and kept plowing ahead. Which is to say, I'd stopped feeling my own stress. Lack of self-care led me to be damaging and dangerous. So, lesson #3 for me is "slow down" life, and "feel" more.

I don't know how to do that just now. I may be like this until I get my paper done, and then I may need some time to adjust to being human again. So, please, pray for me on this, that I get past this and get smarter about my own limitations.

Probably that's enough for this morning. There may be more God wants to teach me from this disaster I've made. But each week in worship, before we begin hearing from God, we have in a confession prayer each week, right? This is my "expanded personal confession" that I would put into that silence after we have read aloud the week's confession prayer together. I don't want to stand up here to preach God's Word without coming clean about the violations I've committed, and the lessons I've learned, and what I think I can do to be better. Because I want to be better, not bitter. I have always wanted to be a good pastor to you, and I failed in this. I am sorry.

The "real" message this morning is about *not keeping our "faith" locked away from our relationships, our business decisions, our recreation – you know, the rest of life*. I hope my confession has been a big illustration of how I did the opposite, and the terrible results that kept snowballing because of it.

The way this question one time came at Jesus was to me an instance of this, and it fits into the series we've been pursuing together. For this month of September, and next Sunday as well, we have been exploring the acts of worship. We've heard God speak to us about Sabbath – what we get wrong and what we get right about that. We all need Sabbath, and whatever break we take from toil, that's a great time to rebuild our relationships with God and with others—vertical and horizontal relationships we need. Two weeks ago, we also looked at the role of music and singing in our worship – it's something we DO to raise our praise to God. Last week we talked about another thing we DO in worship – giving to God -- and how God sees our relationships with others as even more important than that act of devotion. God will wait for us to make things right with someone who has something against us. After we've made things right, as best we can, *then* we can bring our gifts to God.

Sabbath makes space in our schedule for worship and relationship rebuilding. When we SING and when we GIVE, we are focusing on God, but not without also bringing with us the rest of our lives. In the Scripture section today, Jesus gives us a summary of God's whole desire for us, and then works it over with a Bible scholar in the crowd. Open your Bibles this morning to Luke's gospel, chapter 10. Find verse 25. Please listen with me for God's Word to us today, as I read these words aloud. *[text]*

Most of us call this a parable, but in truth, it's an example story, and unlike many of Jesus' parables that seem open to several interpretations, this one is so clear that the Bible expert gets it right away, and Jesus confirms it: "*Neighbor is as neighbor does.*"

Now, was Jesus talking to US, also? Let's put ourselves in the place of Jesus' questioner. What did Jesus think when he heard the other man say, "And who is my neighbor?"

Some answers could be obvious, right? Your family in your household, and your servants and extended relatives, they are all "neighbors". Your neighbors are also your neighbors.

But how far does that go? Are the people down the block, your neighbors? Are people in Newcastle your neighbors? Are people in Cleveland your neighbors? How about in Mexico? Or, Morocco? Or, Iraq? Or Somalia? Where does it end? Where do my obligations end, if I'm going to be a "good boy"? I think that's what Jesus was hearing in this man's question. Our Bible scholar could quote the scripture from Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19, word for word. But he had a big question on what it meant – for him. Who is his neighbor? How far does that go?

Now, instead of giving a list, Jesus gives a story. But it's a story with an edge. You probably know that the people of Samaria were considered untouchable by good Israelites. The roots of that came from an incident several hundred years previously, when the Samaritans had sent a delegation to Cyrus, the Emperor of Persia, who had just conquered the Babylonian Empire. The Samaritans had heard Cyrus was getting ready to release the Israelites from their captivity in Babylon, and even to give them back the valuable treasures of the Jerusalem Temple which the Babylonians had looted. For a lot of reasons, the Samaritans really didn't want this, and their delegation asked Cyrus not to do such nice things for the Israelites. Cyrus did it anyway, and a lot of Israelites went home, only to find conditions at Jerusalem and elsewhere worse than they imagined. Trying to scratch out a living, they also stretched themselves even further to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and the Temple, at least to some extent. They reached out to the Samaritans for help, but the Samaritans refused—they even recruited some other small

groups around to attack Jerusalem. But Nehemiah organized the people in ways to protect the rebuilding of the wall, and the opposition came to nothing. But the memory of all that remained, even up until Jesus' day. Good Jews, if they had to travel from Judea in the south to some business or family in the north, would go out of their way to walk around Samaria – a big additional effort – to avoid setting a sandal on Samaritan soil. And that only reinforced this animosity. Good Israelites also said unkind things about Samaritans on other grounds, but I'll leave that out today. "Samaria" became a curse word. Good Jews would spit when they said the word.

So when Jesus casts as Samaritan as the hero of his story, it messes with the minds of his listeners. And that's just what he wants—to shake us from our fatal "hardening of the categories" we seem to have.

Who is it that we would never expect to do something so generous, so compassionate? Do we tell ugly "Samaritan stories" about one group or another? Do we get instantly irate at the mention of some folks? Then, Jesus is talking to us. That's a prejudice. "Give it up," says Jesus. "God loves them, too, and so should you."

But I'll take another minute with you to explore this story in a rather literal application that we face frequently. In Jesus' story, the merchant was traveling on business, probably carrying a lot of cash. Ordinary travel was a dangerous business in those days. Our businessman was taking a significant risk, but "it was the cost of doing business," we would say. Now we have Brinks armored trucks to carry cash, and we have checks and credit cards to avoid cash transactions and the need to carry wads of money around. Significant cash goes with armed guards. But not then. And in a society with a lot of poor people, crime was high, with little risk of being caught.

Now, these religious people had good reasons to avoid the beaten man. He was bleeding, Jesus said specifically. Well, priests could not touch human blood because it would make them ritually unclean; they couldn't do their work in the Temple at Jerusalem if they were not ritually ready, according to the Law of Moses. The priest goes on his way. The Levite – another order of priests – does the same. Everybody knows priests and Levites don't have money, so no one robs them. Then the Samaritan appears. Apparently, he's on business, too. He's taking the same risk. And he takes on more risk by stopping for the victim beside the road. He takes the poor man, cleans him up (touches the wounds), and gets him to an inn. He pays the cost of the man's care – about two days pay, so figure whatever you make or made in two days is what you'd shell out for this stranger if you were there. The Samaritan is the hero, the neighbor, the compassionate one.

Now, we come across people in trouble as we travel, don't we -- a car stopped on the side of the road, a beggar at the shopping center, a hitchhiker sticking out his or her thumb? How do we decide to get involved, or not? There's some risk for us, too, isn't there? Don't you start going through all the "what-if's"? What if this person wants to harm me? What if there are others I can't see who would gang up on me? Can I really help this person, and still make my meeting on time? (I don't allow for extra time for these things when I am on my way to an appointment, so I have to decide to stiff the people waiting for me, if I stop to help for who-knows-how-long.)

Will our compassion be stronger than our fear -- fear of losing respect from those waiting for us; fear of injury or loss, fear of being taken-advantage-of? At least now we have cell phones

available; we can call to inform people where we are and what is happening. We can also call for help. So the fears are not as great as they were. But will we bother? Will we take the time? Will we put someone else's welfare ahead of our own, someone we don't even know, someone who is different from our economic status, race, gender? That's still our challenge, isn't it?

In our church, for all our talk about the importance of relationships, for reasons of pride or fear we don't let people know about needs weighing on us. Someone is without work, and they are running out of funds. Who do they tell – anyone among us? Their Life Group, their Deacon? When someone goes to the hospital, who in the Life Group steps up and organizes visits to the hospital room, sees to it that the pets are fed and the lawn is mowed and the mail picked up? In some groups, this happens; in others, it does not. Often, no one in the group follows up when someone is missing; we just assume they didn't want to come, or, say, preferred to watch football on Monday nights during the NFL season. No one asks them about them. How much love is that? We can do better. Talk about THAT in your Life Group – who will make that call, week by week?

Jesus says, our daily decisions in these situations are the evidence for “loving God and loving others” that our faith requires. Our religion is not separate from our lives. To you and me, Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.”

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California
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