

“WHICH OF THESE THREE... WAS A NEIGHBOR?”

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, April 10, 2016
Third Sunday of Easter. FCCH, 9:00 a.m. HCC, 10:30 a.m.
Making Disciples. Making a Difference.*

Scripture Reading – Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” 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.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” 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. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 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. 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.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”



*Two Paintings of the Good Samaritan
Eugène Delacroix, 1849 Vincent van Gogh, 1890*

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho winds through a deep gorge called the Wadi Qelt. It's been a popular hiking destination in years past, but since it's in the occupied territories on the West Bank, it can be as dangerous now as it was in Jesus' time.

Along this road are the remains of a Byzantine church that was built many centuries ago to commemorate the location of the inn where the merciful Samaritan brought the injured man he had stopped to help.

This otherwise unidentified man had suffered serious injuries at the hands of a gang of social bandits, who “stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.”

Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw the wounded man, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

(In Jesus' time, levites had responsibility, among other things, for the music that was sung in synagogue services. So if you're looking for the priest and the levite in this room this morning, look no further than the pulpit or the organ bench! Sorry, Eric.)

These two religious leaders, for reasons known only to themselves, chose the path of avoidance that day when they saw the wounded man and walked by on the other side.

At this point in the story, Jesus' audience would have expected to hear about a fourth traveler on the road. They would have expected this fourth traveler to be a lay person, someone not part of the official ecclesiastical establishment, but nonetheless someone from the same religious and ethnic group as the wounded man. But Jesus identified this fourth traveler as a Samaritan—an outsider, an alien.

This fourth traveler on the Jericho road acted quite differently from the priest and the levite. Instead of the path of avoidance, he chose the path of spontaneous altruism. He acted, Jesus said, out of compassion for the wounded man. He responded out of emotion, not out of rational calculation. He had an inner feeling of solidarity with the wounded man, and so he stopped to help him, possibly in so doing putting himself at risk.

Who might today's Samaritan be? A Palestinian who stops to help a Jewish hiker wounded by gunfire along today's Jericho Road? An Iraqi who stops to help an American soldier wounded by a roadside bomb? A Syrian refugee who stops to help a xenophobic politician having a heart attack?

Some of you may have heard of the Christian nonprofit organization called Samaritan's Purse. This organization was founded by, and continues to be led by, Franklin Graham, a son of Billy and Ruth Graham. Franklin Graham is an outspoken opponent of gay rights. He has said that he believes that Satan is behind the legalization of same-sex marriage. He has claimed he loves gay

people ["enough to care to warn them that if they want to continue living like this, it's the flames of hell for you."](#)¹ I'm no fan of Franklin Graham.

But here's the thing. A while ago, a Facebook friend of mine, who like me is a UCC minister and a strong supporter of gay rights, posted a link to a video of Samaritan's Purse volunteers welcoming Syrian refugees on the Greek island of Lesbos after their perilous voyage in an inflatable raft across the stormy Mediterranean.

While self-proclaimed Christian politicians in this country make headlines with comments about how dangerous Mexican immigrants and Muslim refugees are, these young Christian women and men of Samaritan's Purse are welcoming Muslim refugees with open arms and open hearts.

I have to admit, when I watched this video (and I watched it several times), I had a hard time believing that people connected in some way to Franklin Graham could serve as role models for me, could challenge me to do my small part to help a refugee family.

So I think I can readily identify with Jesus' audience, and with the lawyer who asked the question that led to the story, in being caught off guard by a Samaritan who became neighbor to a wounded man. I was caught off guard by volunteers with Samaritan's Purse becoming neighbors to Syrian refugees.

What Jesus' story does is to move both its characters and its audiences out of their comfort zone. I suspect that both the priest and the levite were not fully comfortable with the choice they made to avoid someone whose neighbor they could have become. On some level, they must have been aware of the possible consequences of their choice to pass by on the other side.

The series of actions performed by the Samaritan—cleansing the man's wounds, bandaging them, taking him to an inn, paying for his lodging and his subsequent care—might have taken him a distance from his comfort zone. Perhaps the Samaritan, like the rest of us, had traveled this road or a similar road before and passed by on the other side. But on this particular day, moved by compassion to an act of spontaneous altruism, he stopped to help. And he gave freely of his resources to help someone who had no resources.

I wonder if the innkeeper had to move out of his comfort zone in order to accept a badly wounded stranger as a guest in his inn. When the Samaritan left the next morning, he put the innkeeper in the role of caregiver—paid caregiver to be sure, but caregiver nonetheless. Jesus does not say whether the innkeeper had any qualms about this arrangement; I suspect he might have, but the Samaritan traveler left him no choice.

In today's world, there are millions of wounded people lying by the side of the road. There are also untold numbers of people who, like the first-century Samaritan in Jesus' story, aren't willing to pass by on the other side. The young volunteers with Samaritan's Purse are but one example.

¹<http://www.glaad.org/cap/franklin-graham>.

Fortunately for the Samaritan in Jesus' story, and for the wounded man he stopped to help, there was an inn along the Jericho Road where the man could be cared for. The keeper of this inn did not turn the travelers away because there was no room at the inn.

In today's world, facing a refugee crisis not seen since the end of World War II in Europe, the role of the innkeeper on the Jericho Road is being played by community groups such as the Middletown Refugee Resettlement Coalition.

As of today, our Coalition is well-organized and well-prepared to welcome a refugee family. It almost feels like we are runners crouched at the starting line of a race, waiting for IRIS to fire the starter's gun.

I'm aware that this experience of helping to resettle a refugee family is likely to move all of us out of our comfort zones. There will no doubt be bumps in the road, some of which will be due to cultural differences between us and the family we'll be getting to know.

Soon, a thoroughly vetted refugee family will arrive in Middletown. Our resettlement coalition that welcomes this family will be similar to the innkeeper in Jesus' story. I covet your prayers for us, that as we move out of our comfort zones, we will show genuine hospitality to this family.