

Luke 10:25-37
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“Risk Taking Faith”

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There is an old saying, “Before you criticize someone, you should walk a mile in their shoes. That way, when you criticize them, you are a mile away and you have their shoes.”

With the parable of the Good Samaritan it seems Christians are always trying to put ourselves into the shoes of different characters in this story. We pray we aren't as cold hearted as the Priest and the Levite, walking by a person in noticeable pain. We figure we aren't as good as the Samaritan who actually stopped, bandaged the wounds, helped the man to the Inn, AND paid for his stay.

Truth is... at one time or another, we have been all the characters in the story. We have gone above and beyond to help others and we have bypassed tremendous pain and suffering. We have been the beaten person needing help, and we have been the Levite who just didn't have time to be bothered.

New Testament Professor Stephen Patterson teaches us how this story follows a traditional storytelling structure. These stories always begin with the Religious elites failing and always end with a common Jewish person as the hero.

But in this parable Jesus shatters the traditional structure by making the hero of this story a dreaded Samaritan. Samaritans are adherents of Samaritanism, a religion closely related to Judaism. They believe their worship is the true religion of ancient Israel from before the Babylonian captivity, and it has been preserved by those who remained in the Land of Israel through the captivity.

So everything is turned on its head. The religious elites fail. But Jesus challenges ancient stereotypes when the unsung hero turns out to be a Samaritan-- someone loved less than a Priest or Levite. The crowd goes away confused and angry instead of inspired.

But as we look at the characters in this story, the Innkeeper seems to get overlooked. I have never heard a sermon on the innkeeper. It takes some imagination, but let's play around in this parable for a bit and see what we might learn.

I imagine the Innkeeper being level headed. He is worried about the beaten man yet calculating his risk every step along the way. To his credit the innkeeper allows a beaten and bleeding man to sleep in his guest room on his clean sheets. Yet he accepts full payment because he has a business to run. To his credit he is willing to extend the man's stay beyond what has been paid. But he needs a promise that the Good Samaritan will return and pay the difference. He cares, but he doesn't seem willing to take any particular kind of risk in his caring.

This is beginning to sound familiar. We drive by a car stranded on the side of the road, look over and think, "Ok he has a cell phone, he can get help. I don't need to stop." We avoid the mumbling woman in the grocery store because we are confident our conversation with her would not make any difference. In our caring for others... We calculate.

You may be aware that the observation of Ramadan ended this past Tuesday. Ramadan is observed by Muslims worldwide as a month of fasting to commemorate the first revelation of the Quran to the prophet Muhammad. This annual observance is regarded as one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

As a way of combating a lot of Anti-muslim propaganda in the public eye, a number of our sister United Church of Christ congregations posted messages outside the church saying, "A Blessed Ramadan to our Muslim Neighbors." It seemed like a small act of solidarity and support. Until the public response came.

UCC colleagues at these churches reported getting threatening phone calls. One church reported their sign being vandalized to the extent that many of the letters making up the supportive message were stolen or destroyed. It turned out these little supportive messages were a bold act of faithfulness for these churches, all of whom said they will do it again next year and hope other churches will follow suit.

This is the kind of faith Jesus is calling us to. A faith where caring for one another, supporting one another, may involve some risk or sacrifice on our part. He doesn't want us to practice calculated... lukewarm... innkeeper faith, he wants us to practice caught on fire for Jesus, Good Samaritan faith.

Will we be the Good Samaritan every time? Of course not. In truth we don't even know if the Good Samaritan was good every time, it is a story after all. But Jesus wants us to learn faith in God will call us to surprise ourselves with the risk we take to love and care for another. Faith includes engagement with the controversial topics of the day. Faith includes lifting up the oppressed, loving our enemies, welcoming the stranger, and refugee. This includes risk. As Robert Schnase writes in the booklet, Risk Taking Mission and Service, "Jesus shows that God's way includes costly demonstrations of unexpected love to the least likely."

And that is where we find God in this story. When we live a risk taking faith, we discover we have entered the abundant, uncalculatable presence and power of the Holy Spirit. We find ourselves relying on God's comfort when we are uncomfortable, relying on God's guidance when we aren't sure where to turn next, relying on God's love when we meet resistance, and relying on God's power when we feel powerless.

So this morning I close sharing the risk taking faith of a devoted Jewish man who died this week. Holocaust survivor, Nobel laureate and author Elie Wiesel died at the age of 87. Wiesel survived the World War II Nazi concentration camp of Buchenwald and death camp of Auschwitz. Losing his sister and mother to the gas chamber, and facing the death of his father

just before the concentration camps were liberated became a trauma so powerful he could not write about it for 10 years. After liberation, he went to France, then Israel and the United States, where he advocated on behalf of victims of hate and persecution around the world.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a statement, "Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory, embodied the determination of the human spirit to overcome the darkest of evils, and survive against all the odds. His life was dedicated to the fight against all hatred, and for the sake of (humankind) as created in the image of God — he was a guide for us all."

In a public radio segment on the program "This I Believe," Wiesel said, "To forget the victims (of the holocaust) means to kill them a second time,"

In his later years, Wiesel refused to slow down, even after quintuple-bypass surgery and the loss of his personal and philanthropic foundation's fortune to Bernie Madoff's ponzi scheme. In 2012, he wrote his last book, **Open Heart**, touching on both experiences.

It was reassuring he said, to know that many have listened and there are many more generations of witnesses, ready to stand guard against tyranny and hate — long after he is gone.

And Jesus closes today's story with a quote for his followers, "Go and Do likewise!"

Amen