

“Better Off Dead”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Luke 10:25-37
March 5, 2017
First Sunday in Lent

Y’all knew when you called me to be your pastor, I think, that you were essentially hiring an overgrown muppet. I’m fairly certain I quoted Kermit the Frog in the sermon on my first Sunday. I guess what I’m saying is, you signed up for this. So bear with me a second here.

Imagine that Jim Henson brought Jesus of Nazareth on as a creative consultant during the early days of *Sesame Street*. And Jesus made a few tweaks here and there to get his message across. For example, the classic song and sketch “Who Are the People in your Neighborhood?” Do you remember that one? Well, here’s how it goes in our alternate universe:

Bob starts singing:

*Oh, who are the people in your neighborhood?
In your neighborhood?
In your neighborhood?
Say, who are the people in your neighborhood?
The people that you meet each day*

Bob walks a few feet and comes across a blue muppet carrying a sack of mail. The muppet explains that he picks up letters and magazines and packages and brings them to where they belong. The blue muppet picks up the verse:

*Oh, the postman always brings the mail
Through rain or snow or sleet or hail
I’ll work and work the whole day through
To get your letters safe to you*

Then Bob and blue sing together:

*'Cause a postman is a person in your neighborhood
In your neighborhood
He’s in your neighborhood
A postman is a person in your neighborhood
A person that you meet each day*

Next, Bob encounters an orange muppet. She’s wearing a lab coat and a stethoscope and has a tongue depressor attached to her felt fingers. She explains how she helps kids who have fevers or need bandages. Then she sings:

*The doctor makes you well real quick
If by chance you're feeling sick
She works and works the whole day long
To help you feel well and strong*

*'Cause a doctor is a person in your neighborhood
In your neighborhood
She's in your neighborhood
A doctor is a person in your neighborhood
A person that you meet each day*

So far, this exactly how it played out on the real *Sesame Street*. But then, Bob strolls a bit and meets a green muppet carrying a protest sign and waving a Bible. The green muppet explains how he's a member of the Westboro Baptist Church, and he spends his day picketing military funerals, Catholic churches, synagogues, anyone affiliated with the LGBTQ community, and making lists of people that he believes God hates. Green muppet starts singing:

Oh, a hate group likes to yell and scream —

But Bob runs away in tears. Jesus looks over at Jim Henson and smiles. *Nailed it.*

This is my feeble attempt to explain the offense Jesus causes by telling this parable about the man on the road to Jericho. Our modern ears hear “Good Samaritan,” and we think of a do-gooder who rushes in to help someone in distress. But “Samaritan” was an ugly word for 1st Century Jews. A little history:

In the 920s BCE, the northern part of the kingdom of Israel broke away. They broke away from the kingdom. From the covenant. From King David's line. A couple hundred years later, the northern kingdom of Israel, with its capital of Samaria, was defeated by the Assyrians. Then another century and a half later, the southern kingdom of Judah was taken by the Babylonians. Fast forward a few centuries, and what emerges under Roman rule is that the northerners, who worship Yahweh, are otherwise unrecognizable to the southerners. Those northerners are called Samaritans. The southerners are called Jews.

The Samaritans were seen as foreigners, with a polluted religion. There was hostility always and violence occasionally, wrapped up in ethnicity and nationalism and deep religious differences. They were fairly close to one another, in the big picture. But as we know, that can lead to the most bitter of rivalries. This makes Alabama-Auburn look like a passionate romance. It wasn't your casual “oh, *those* people.” Samaritans were infidels. Samaritans were disgusting. Samaritans were hated, and it wasn't a secret.

So, of course, Jesus makes the hero of his story a Samaritan. Did you notice at the end, when he asks the lawyer, “Which of these... was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” that the lawyer can't even say “The Samaritan?” He says, “The one who showed him mercy.”

It's easy to hear this parable and quickly jump to making ourselves the Samaritan. But for the listeners to this parable, and the early readers of Luke, that jump would have taken a bit of work, and I think that's intentional.

Imagine listening to this story for the first time and hearing Jesus talk about the beaten man. *Well, we certainly don't want to be him. What else you got? Oh, a priest! I'll be like the pr— oh, whoops. Nope, don't want to be the priest. Oooh, a Levite! Oh dear. No. Levite's not the hero. Okay, but I know how these stories go: A priest, a Levite, and a scribe walk into a brothel! Excellent, I can relate to the — wait, what? A Samaritan? What in the world? If I found myself beaten on the side of the road and saw a Samaritan coming to help, well, I'd be better off dead! This is the story this guy tells on the way to Jerusalem? This guy's gonna get himself killed.*

It's hard to muster this kind of vulnerability, even internally, but I wonder if we can't imagine, deep in the secret lockbox in the hidden compartment in the basement of our souls, the face of the person we'd least like to see coming to our aid in an emergency. It's the face that would make us think to our wounded self, "I'd rather be dead than have that person help me." If you can't come up with a face, take that home with you and think about it, because that's the face Jesus wants you to see when he tells this parable.

I think he wants us to see ourselves in the beaten man, so that we'll understand that God shows up when and where and in whom we least expect it. And so we'd better get over ourselves. Jesus needs this lawyer, who wants to justify himself, to comprehend that we rely on God, and that we need each other, and that when you try to justify yourself, you end up missing what God is doing. You're so wrapped up in the threat, that you miss the salvation.

Of course, we're also supposed to see ourselves in the priest and the Levite. We're supposed to wonder how we could ever walk by someone in need and not see them. Or see them and act like we don't see them.

And, yes, in the end, we have to be willing to be the one who showed him mercy — the Samaritan. The Samaritan sees the man in need. He doesn't look away, he doesn't pretend not to see him. And he doesn't form a committee to discuss the problem of "road people" in order to calculate the risks and burdens of potentially offering them some assistance. The Samaritan draws near to the man. Instead of crossing the road, the Samaritan reduces the distance between them. He gets a closer look. And the Samaritan has compassion for the man, actually doing something, and giving of himself to help.¹

Christ sees us. Christ draws near to us. Christ suffers with us, giving of himself.

Who are the people in your neighborhood? They are the children of Alabama, and the folks at the Presbyterian Home for Children in Talladega are better at seeing them than just about anyone else. And from seeing, the Presbyterian Home folks move to drawing near. And then they do something, demonstrating deep compassion.

¹<http://www.davidlose.net/2016/07/pentecost-8-c-the-god-we-didnt-expect/>

Who are the people in your neighborhood? Just a few blocks from my house, there's a man named Mr. Frank, who keeps Christmas lights on one of his trees so that it's visible at night across from a stop sign that folks like to run. This man grew up in that house, and moved back into it after his mother died. Since moving back, he got "Kids Zone" signs put up on his block to make sure motorists are aware to slow down. Last week, Mr. Frank received an anonymous letter chiding him for the lights, and for the state of his yard, and for not just selling his old house and letting someone build a McMansion in its place so that property values could go up. Well, neighbors got wind of the nasty letter, and they took action. They went into their attics and their basements and they hauled out the Christmas decor. You can see lights, wreaths, several decked out trees, and even an inflatable snowman.

Who are the people in your neighborhood? On Friday, at noon, Christians, Jews, Unitarians, and others congregated in front of the Birmingham Islamic Society's Hoover Crescent Center to pray for peace and to show solidarity. We preacher types gave eloquently crafted prayers. But the highlight of the vigil was a five year-old boy who started his prayer with "I am a Muslim American" and ended it with, "God, please protect my country."

Who are the people in your neighborhood? We don't get to choose. We don't get to choose the people God wants us to see and to help. We don't get to choose who God will send to help us. We don't get to choose who is in, and who is out. We can look away. We can call them foreigners, aliens, or illegals. We can even build a wall. We just can't be offended or surprised when Christ sees our neighbors, draws near to them, and offers them hope. We also can't ignore Jesus saying "Go and do likewise." If we plug our ears and cover our eyes to the way that God works, we will find ourselves on the side of the road, having missed the very salvation we were seeking.

Amen.