

“Passersby”
Luke 10:25-37
July 14, 2019

Back when Susan and I got married in 1980, we had only one week of vacation time to take for our honeymoon. Susan’s grandparents graciously offered us the use of their home in Bangor for the week, so we left behind a sweltering Washington D.C. at the end of August to spend seven days in the relative cool of Maine.

Both of us are fans of seafood, and so for the first few nights we ate out, dining on lobster - which was pricey even in 1980. So one night we decided to buy ourselves a couple of lobsters so we could fix them ourselves and save a few bucks. The problem was that I, as a Chicagoan, knew nothing about preparing boiled lobster, and Susan figured that I, as the Man of the family, would take charge. We quickly reached an impasse. Neither of us wanted to kill these creatures, which were very happily scaling around on her grandparents’ kitchen floor. I guess Susan figured that guys like to kill things, but being almost a pacifist I demurred. And so neither lobster was in any immediate danger, or so it seemed.

But remember, this was August, 1980. Both Republicans and Democrats had just nominated their choices for President, and tempers were beginning to run high. That’s when Susan hit upon a plan: the only way we would kill our two lobsters would be to name them Carter and Reagan. And so in a fit of partisan fury, I plunged our poor unsuspecting lobster dubbed Carter into his bubbly, watery grave, while Susan did the same for her beast, whom she dubbed Reagan. All that was needed was plenty of melted butter, and we were all set.

Whether it’s from the realm of politics, or history, or just the people next door, I’m sure most of us have a favorite villain whom we love to hate. Maybe it’s a politician; maybe not. But now Jesus is asking us, through the story of the Good Samaritan, to imagine our villain as the very image of virtue, goodness, and righteousness. It’s not very easy. Because what Jesus is trying to tell us is that salvation is only possible for

those who realize that everybody else is just as worthy as we are, if not more so. As soon as you think you're better than anybody else, you're doomed.

Now let's step back for a moment and first take a look not at the Good Samaritan (which most listeners in the time of Jesus would have decided was a logical impossibility to begin with ... all Samaritans were repulsive in just about every way you could imagine) - but let's look at the poor guy who needed to be rescued: you know, the nameless traveller who was left at the side of the Jerusalem-to-Jericho road, half dead.

What had he been thinking? That road was well known for banditry, brigands, and all manner of unsavory characters. Most of us wouldn't think of taking a stroll through some of the neighborhoods in the North End of Hartford, or Harlem, or South Central L.A. But this is where our half-dead hero ended up. But did Christ ever question whether this man deserved to be rescued? Some of those listening to the story for the first time, I bet, had that very thought, ungracious as it was: that the traveller on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho deserved what he got, that he had been taught a good lesson, and he could just languish there for all they cared. After all, who would be crazy enough to take this trip alone?

Or maybe it was all a trick: maybe he only looked half-dead, but in reality had confederates waiting in the bushes nearby, behind some rocks, setting up an ambush for any do-gooders foolish enough to intervene. And so some folk, who in conventional circumstances - that is to say, when it wasn't going to cost them anything - some folk might have thought about helping out somehow. Maybe they would have called 911 on their cell phone before scurrying along, fearing to end up just like this unfortunate half dead sucker lying at the side of the road.

And so on we pass. And the upshot of it all is that we, in our prudence, in our suspicion, in our lack of compassion - WE are the *real* villains in this story - maybe almost as much as the robbers and thieves who did the evil deed in the first place. And then comes the stinger: the people who we *thought* were the *real* bad guys all along -

Carter, or Reagan, or the Nazis, or the Commies, our landlord, the neighborhood bully - fill in the blank - they inexplicably end up being the good guys after all.

Is there any wonder that Jesus got into as much trouble as he did? Objectively speaking, there was no way that anyone could successfully challenge a single word that Jesus said. But it seemed so wrong - it went against the grain - it rubbed people the wrong way. It infuriated the opposition because Jesus challenged the way that people had thought for hundreds of years. And Jesus was telling us that we were all wrong - dead wrong.

Does anybody really like to hear that? We all want to hear that the landlord is wrong. We want someone to tell us that, for us, Charity begins at home - and it's everybody else who is just plain selfish. We want to hear that we keep our cool, but that others are callous. We want to hear that we have presence and style, but that other people are just plain arrogant.

But Jesus isn't always interested in telling us what we want to hear. He is not invariably in the business of indulging us. That might come at a later time, when the battle is over, and our work is done, and we appear in glory, hoping to hear the words, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." But for right now, Jesus has other plans, because we keep trying to get out of answering the tough questions by saying, like the lawyer in our story: "Well, just who do you think is my neighbor, anyway?"

We can almost read the thoughts of the first passerby, who probably said to himself, "Oh, I'd like to help you out, but first you have to come around to my way of thinking." Maybe the second passerby thought "Sure, I'll lend a hand - by the way, is there any reward money? What's in it for me?" Or how about this all-purpose excuse: "Help you??!? God helps those who help themselves!" Or even, "Why should I help *you* out? We'd all be better off without you."

Whom have we passed by, lately? Maybe someone who was too afraid to ask, and yet was obviously in desperate straits? How many of us have hid behind the thought that

we really shouldn't meddle, and should leave well enough alone? Or maybe we figure that no good deed goes unpunished, so our good deeds are few and far between. And so we pass by someone we might not have even noticed ... because we are in too much of a rush, or are so wrapped up in ourselves that the rest of the world is a blur ... because all that the rest of the world is good for is to revolve around us.

But let us just ask ourselves this one final question: when was the last time any of us were the heroes in one of Jesus' stories?

Let us pray: