

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Nancy Livingston at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 14, 2013, the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost.

“Your Jericho Road”

Luke 10:25-37

This wonderful passage from Luke is this preacher’s dream text AND nightmare text. It is a dream text because I love this passage, as I suspect that many of you love it. We call it “The Good Samaritan.” I know this is a valued story here at First Congregational Church. We have a ministry named for the main character in the story.

Many of us first heard this story in our childhood in Sunday school or Vacation Bible School. You may have even been an actor in a dramatization of this story. We all wanted to be the Samaritan. This story is embedded in our hearts as well as our minds. We love the story. And we like to talk and hear about things dear to our hearts.

On the other hand, it’s also a nightmare text. You see, it rolls around every three years in the Common Lectionary many of us follow, and for those of us who have preached a long time, or sat in the pews in worship a long time, that adds up to a lot of sermons on “the Good Samaritan.”

After one has preached on this text fifteen times, what can possibly be left to say? And if you’ve heard 15 sermons on “the Good Samaritan,” surely you’ve heard everything that could possibly be said about it. There are moments when I am grateful the story doesn’t appear in Matthew and Mark as well. Just think about how many sermons that would be!

The saving reality for us preachers is what we call “the preaching moment,” when the pastor and the people **together** engage a text or an idea. I have a manuscript here; I could have simply sent it to the office and ask them to make copies. At this

point in the service I could have asked the Deacons to distribute the copies and then given you all about 10 minutes to read them. But we would have missed “the preaching moment.” You see, we in the church are bold enough to claim that the Holy Spirit works among us as we worship together and something unique happens when we engage the Word **together**. When preachers bring their reading, study and writing, their reflection and their prayers to this moment, as the Spirit works they just might say something they have not said before. And when the people in the pews bring their openness, their expectation, their listening ears, their engaged minds and hearts, as the Spirit works, they just might hear something they haven’t heard before . . . or they might hear some familiar idea in a new way.

And so with this hope and expectation, I invite you to join me in prayer. ***Holy God, speak through the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts, that we may hear your living Word for this day. Amen.***

Now to this familiar story.

A man is going from Jerusalem to Jericho. We know absolutely nothing about this man, apart from what happens to him. He has no name, no identifying characteristics: no nationality, no religion, no social rank, no history, no context. Nothing. All we know is what happens to him on this road. On this dangerous, treacherous road to Jericho.

We may not know anything about the man, but we do know something about the road. Jericho is about 18 miles northeast of Jerusalem. First century historian, Josephus, explained the setting for his readers, telling them that Jerusalem sits up on a hill, some 2,500 feet above sea level, while Jericho is down in the valley, some 825 feet below sea level. That makes for a dramatic descent of some 3,300 feet on a dry, arduous , dangerous winding road that was conducive to ambush.

In his “I’ve been to the mountain” speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. recounted how he and his wife arrived in Israel, rented a car, and drove from Jerusalem to Jericho. As soon as they were on that road, he turned to his wife and said, “I can see why Jesus used this

as the setting for his parable.” It is a hazardous road notorious for its difficulty. About 13 miles out of Jerusalem there’s a narrow pass whose Arabic name translates “Ascent of Blood,” calling attention to all the blood that bandits have shed there.

The man in Jesus’ story experiences what many others had experienced on this road: He falls victim to robbers who take everything he owns, beat him and leave him for dead along the edge of the road.

But he’s fortunate that there are other people on the road. The first to come his way is a priest, and you certainly would expect a man representing the presence of God in this world to stop and help. The text doesn’t specifically say this, but I suspect this man of God is in a hurry. He’s probably on his way to his community’s General Synod and he knows that if he is late he will miss the instructions for electronic voting and might not even get his electronic gadget. And then his vote would not count. He can’t have that. So he actually moves to the other side of the road so that he won’t have to look closely at the man and he can convince himself that he isn’t responsible here. This is a really hard text for clergy to read.

Next comes the Levite. By the time of Jesus the Levites has become the principle interpreters of the law, the teachers of the law. Some versions of the New Testament identify this person as a lawyer. If anybody would know how good Jews were to respond to someone in need, it would be a Levite. But he does the same thing the priest did: He crosses over to the other side of the road so that he doesn’t have to look closely. He’s probably got a legal brief to get filed before the courthouse closes.

Now we all know that the last person you would expect to render help would be a Samaritan one of those unclean descendents of the Jews who intermarried with the Assyrian conquerors all those years ago. Just imagine the shock felt by Jesus’ listeners when he told them that the person who stopped to give aid was the Samaritan. This outsider does not move to the other side of the road; he gets “up close and personal,” close enough to assess the man’s dreadful condition. Jesus tells us he is “moved

with pity.” He actually treats the wounds as best he can with wine to cleanse them and oil to keep them soft and bandages to protect them. Then he puts the man on his donkey and takes him to the next inn, where he makes a down payment to the innkeeper and tells him to take care of the injured man. He indicates he will go on about his business in Jericho and when he comes back by the inn he will stop in and settle up with the innkeeper in case his down payment doesn’t cover the entire cost of the care.

The reason Jesus told this story was that a lawyer had asked him a question some time back. The question was “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The ensuing conversation reveals the central core of the law: “Love God with all your heart, you soul, your strength and mind. And love your neighbor as yourself.”

But this didn’t quite satisfy the lawyer, who knew all the ins and outs of the law, all the boundaries around relationships, who was clean and who wasn’t and who really wanted to trip Jesus up and be rid of him. And so he pushed a little more: “And just who is my neighbor?” And so we have the parable. But at the end of the parable, Jesus becomes the question-asker: “Which of these three, do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” Suddenly, it’s not about neighbors at all; it’s about us; it’s about being neighbors.

Now you can see why this passage is a preacher’s dream. There are so many ways to unpack this text. We could talk at length about the two characters in the story who turn away. We could talk about the willingness of the outsider. We could talk about the extent to which he is willing to get involved.

But I want to think with you for just a few more minutes about the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, the Jericho Road, and how it is we travel on it. We sometimes get caught up in the dichotomy of literalism verses symbolism. Am I to deal with this information that has come to me literally; or might I think about it as metaphor? I understand the Jericho Road to both: literal and metaphorical. We know there is a literal Jericho Road. I’ve never been on it, but I’ve seen pictures of it. I know it is there.

But I also believe it's a metaphor. The literal Jericho Road was a place of danger and risk, a place where people lived precariously, a stretch of land where life was arduous and difficult, at best. I am sure there is a Jericho Road in your neighborhood; I'm sure there is one in every town in Ohio, in every state in these United States; in every country on the face of this earth. The Jericho Road may start in the Middle East, but it stretches around this globe. The Jericho Road is any place where people live precarious lives, where they feel at risk, insecure and uncertain. It's wherever people are battered and bruised by the circumstances in which they find themselves.

I know the likelihood of my seeing someone beaten and bleeding, lying at the curb on the Jericho Road in my condo community, is just about nil. But I also know that if I am playing close attention I'm likely to encounter a recently widowed woman who is living alone for the first time in her life, uncertain and uneasy in a brand new location, with her only child living in Colorado. You may not find someone beaten and bleeding at the curb in your community either. But I'm certain that if you are looking closely, if you are paying attention, if you are "tuned in" to the people around you, you'll recognize people who are living precariously, insecure and uncertain, needing the assurance, and maybe even the resources, that another human being can bring.

Most of us have lived on the Jericho Road at some time or other in our lives. And if we have been fortunate, we have encountered other human beings who have seen us, come close to really look at us, offered us help, maybe even their resources, and made our lives immeasurably better.

We are called to be people who pay attention on the Jericho Road. People who look closely, as did the Samaritan. Martin Copenhaver, the senior pastor of Village Church in Wellesley, Massachusetts, preached at the Sunday worship service at our recent General Synod gathering in Long Beach, CA.

It was a powerful sermon growing out of a passage in the 7th chapter of Luke. In that passage, Jesus goes to dinner at the home of a Pharisee named Simon. During the meal, a woman who had

not been invited to the meal but who somehow manages to get in anyway, a woman identified only as a “sinner,” comes to Jesus, washes his feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. Simon, naturally, is appalled. He thinks that maybe Jesus is so involved in his conversation that he isn’t really aware of her, doesn’t even see her, for if he did, he would know what kind of woman she is and would respond appropriately.

Jesus, as he so often did, turns the tables and says to Simon, “Do **you** see this woman?” And at the end of the ensuing conversation Jesus says to the woman, “Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.” On our Jericho Road, Jesus asks us, “Do you see this woman? This man? These children?”

We pay close to that story, to the story about the Good Samaritan, and to all the other stories connected with Jesus in the New Testament because we live with the conviction that Jesus shows us who God is and what God values, what life is to be like in God’s kingdom. We learn from Jesus, the incarnate one that God’s is forgiving and merciful, cares about justice, wants good for all God’s children, sees us and knows us and values us all of us.

Our conviction is that we are made in God’s image . . . and so these values are deep within our beings too. The Iona Community, with which I am affiliated, makes an affirmation in its daily liturgy that says, “With people everywhere we affirm God’s goodness at the heart of humanity, planted more deeply than all that is wrong.” We can take God’s call to look and see on our Jericho Roads precisely because of who we are: people with God’s image, and thus God’s values, firmly planted in our DNA.

We all travel on the Jericho Road. where all humanity travels. It’s where the Samaritan saw a need, looked closely, offered what he had in the service of another. And Jesus’ closing words to the Levite in this story are his words for us today: “Go, and do likewise.” Amen.

