

Sermon for Sunday, July 14, 2024
Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
"The Good Samaritan"
Reverend Marion Pruitt-Jefferson
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa

[Scriptures for Sunday, 7/14](#)

John and I thought we had prepared pretty carefully last summer for our 4000 mile road trip. We'd taken the trailer and truck in for service, gotten the tires checked, changed the oil, and we even bought supplemental roadside assistance insurance from a company called Good Sam. For the first two months our travels were, for the most part, uneventful. In the middle of October, we were heading south through Arizona on a busy interstate when one of the tires on the trailer blew out. There wasn't much of a shoulder, so we limped our way to an exit which was just a couple of miles up ahead. We soon discovered that there were no services there, just a narrow two-lane road and not a building in sight. But there was a wide, garbage strewn, gravel pull out where we could be safely off the road and assess the situation. It wasn't actually a ditch, but was fairly "ditch-like." It was 104 degrees that day; but my beloved John is undaunted by such challenges so he got down in the dirt, crawled under the trailer, and released the spare tire. What we didn't know was that travel trailers such as ours only come with a spare tire, but not a tire iron suited to the size of the lug nuts on trailer tires. No problem, I thought, as I dialed up our Good Sam agent, who, as it turned out, was in a call center somewhere in the western hemisphere – maybe? After 45 very, very, frustrating minutes repeating our information and need for help over and over again, I gave up. (I may have used some special words to express my anger!)

There wasn't a lot of traffic at this exit, but as I said, John loves a challenge, so he decided to try a kind of charades. Covered in dust and sweat, he stood at the side of the road with our truck-sized tire iron held high in the air, and his other hand pointed towards the much smaller tires on our trailer. It took a little while, but eventually a guy driving a blue Honda Prius pulled over. A tall, rather good-looking man of Native American descent unfolded himself out of the tiny car, lit up a cigarette, opened his trunk, and handed John this perfect little tire iron. John got back down in the gravel and gave it go. But it wasn't small enough – the tire iron just kept slipping over the lug nut. Observing all of this, the gentleman said, "I don't live too far from here, I'll just run home and grab a different one that'll work." We protested – thanking him and assuring him that he'd done more than enough. "No problem", he said, and drove off down the road. 30 minutes later he showed up again, but unfortunately the same thing happened – the tire iron was just a tiny bit too large. Again, thanks were expressed and for the second time, this gentleman said, "Well, I work in a garage about 40 minutes from here. I know we've got what you need. I'll be back in a while." In a little more than an hour, he was back for the THIRD time – and this time the tire iron worked. John made quick work of removing what was left of the shredded tire and replaced it with the spare. Our real-life Good Samaritan stood quietly, and seemed pleased that he had finally been able to get us the right tool for the job. We thanked him over and over again for his kindness as he got back in his car and drove away.

You know, it's one thing to dare to pull over to help a stranded motorist, but it's entirely another thing to keep coming back, over and over again, wasting an entire afternoon until the problem's solved and the hapless travelers are on their way again. We felt so grateful to the man who showed us mercy.

I know many of you probably have your own good Samaritan stories where someone stepped in and helped you out in a moment of need. I also know for a fact that many, many of you have been the good Samaritan – maybe when you've had a chance encounter with someone who needed help, and most certainly when you've given your time and money to agencies that are out there on the front lines answering human needs. So I don't think it would be very helpful for me to tell you to go out and be better, more efficient, more productive good Samaritans. Many of you are already doing so much. And yet, the needs of our fellow human beings are so vast, we can be overwhelmed at the scope of the suffering.

If you listened to the story of the Good Samaritan and felt like God was sending you a message that you must do more, and more, and more to help your neighbor in need, I want to tell you, just don't go there. Of course, we are obligated to respond, as we are able, to the suffering of our fellow humans - but not to the point that we exhaust our mental, emotional, physical and financial resources. The commandment is to Love God, and Love our Neighbors as Ourselves. What I just described to you is not the way of love. It is the way of burnout and despair.

We are all traveling on this road of life and we all find ourselves at different points in that journey. Much of the time things go smoothly, but sometimes, especially if we've lived long enough, we fall into one of life's ditches. It could be something trivial as a flat tire in an inconvenient location. But most of us have had at least one major 'in the ditch' experience in our lives: the loss of a job, a cancer diagnosis, the death of someone we knew we couldn't live without, a betrayal that led to divorce, a relentless mental health condition. And in these times of great vulnerability we have been blessed by the compassionate care of the people who showed up to help us. That is the Grace and Mercy of God, clothed in human form.

But I want to speak about a larger journey that we are all traveling together. It is our lifelong spiritual journey that leads us home to God. When the lawyer came to speak to Jesus, it was his concern about that spiritual journey that prompted his questions: What must I do to inherit eternal life? What must I do to make my way safely home to God? Jesus didn't answer directly, but simply asked another question, which the lawyer answered correctly: Love God, Love Self, Love Neighbor. But that lawyer wanted to justify himself, he did not understand the freedom that we have in God's way of Love, so he asked for more specific rules - Who is my neighbor?

So Jesus tells this outrageous story about a disreputable person who goes to superhuman efforts to deliver lifesaving care to a stranger lying in a ditch. It defies logic. It's not humanly possible to do what that good Samaritan did, which is the whole point of the story. Because it is not what we do that brings us safely home to God. We cannot earn our way home to God by following the rules, by doing more, giving more, or being more. We can only make our way home to God by trusting in the Love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We journey, not under our own power, but by being lifted up and carried in the arms of mercy. Once we know the height and depth and strength of God's saving Love for us, then, and only then, are we set free to extend that unconditional, inexhaustible love to our neighbor.

