

Ordinary Time: Goodness, For God's Sake (Luke 10:25-37)

Rev. Dr. Keith D. Herron, Senior Pastor

First Baptist Church, JCMO

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Amos 7:7-17, Colossians 1:15-28, Psalm 82)

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/goodness-for-gods-sake

When the lists of “best books” for the last century were drawn, Cormac McCarthy showed up for his book *The Road*.¹ It's a book the critics raved about while the rest of us shirked back in fear. Undoubtedly, *The Road* may have been the most despairing book I've ever read and it stands as a book I can cautiously recommend if I think you're tough enough to read it. How's that for a review?

The Road is about a nameless man and his nameless son who are living in the aftermath of some god-awful post-apocalyptic time when most have already died and all that's left of civilization is run amok by bandits and gangs of men who travel the road looking for victims they can exploit. The man and his son are travelers on that road and they're vulnerable except for the survival skills of the father. Together, the father keeps hope alive with his son as they're “carrying the fire,” McCarthy's rich euphemism for uncertain hope and self-dignity and better times.

All of us live on the road when we take a wrong turn or travel to the far country.

The perilous road runs through school campuses where bullies pick on weaker kids in a culture of the strong bullying the weak simply because they can. They roam the school parking lots and the locker rooms. They huddle menacingly in the hallways where they make a living hell out of a parent's sweet question, “How'd it go at school today, honey?”

The perilous road can run down the middle of the street where you live where no one speaks to one another or bothers to get to know their neighbor.

The perilous road can run through the management of a large corporation where teams eat up the teams with whom they compete.

Or ... the perilous road can run through the gossiping habits of a church that picks apart those who unknowingly enter, unaware that the gossipers will criticize them before they even know the visitor's name.

This Jesus-story is about one person in need and three unwitting persons who are drawn into the drama of helping simply out of chance because they happen to be on the same road heading from Jerusalem to Jericho. They didn't set out on their journey to see who might need

¹ Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006

their help. They simply ran across the plight of the poor man because the circumstances of their trip led them to encounter one another. Call it a fluke or call it fate, they met up with this broken and beaten man because they happened to share the road together.

Jesus took the quizzing of a professor of the law and turned it into a morality play about mercy. The legalist asked the hard questions and Jesus turned the tables on him and made him answer his own questions. Jesus seemed to understand the fact that the questions we ask speak as loudly about the questioner as they do about the answers of the one being questioned. Ever the teacher, Jesus answered him with a question, *“What do you think?”*

This story is not really about our questions or our belief ... it's about how we live. In that kind of exchange, Jesus makes sure it's not about orthodoxy (right belief) but about orthopraxy (right living). At least in Jesus' thinking, if right belief doesn't stay connected to how we live, something vital is missing. So, Jesus told this story in answer to the man's question, *“Who is my neighbor?”*

It's at this point the story takes a decidedly wicked turn. Jesus turns the tables on the smug so-called keepers of the law. This is not a story about the quest to determine right belief. This is not about getting the answers right. It's not about determining whether “your theology is as right as mine,” as it is commonly played.

Maybe the focus of the story doesn't center on the helpers at all. Maybe it's about the one lying bloody in the road. Robert Capon, Episcopal priest, helps us with this interpretation of the story by reversing the interpretation of the meaning of the characters. He sees the central character of the story as the one beaten by robbers and he does that by seeing this character as a Christ-figure who enters a world of danger. In that light, we might consider renaming the parable as some have done as *“The man who fell among thieves.”*

This man was hiking the road from Jerusalem down to Jericho. It was widely known to be a dangerous stretch fraught with the possibility of being trapped on the road. It was a road that most traveled in the safety of a group rather than alone. It was a downward spiral of a trail that descended down from Jerusalem to one of the oldest cities in the world sitting down in the valley carved by the waters of the Jordan River as it flowed slowly down to the world's deepest sinkhole known as the Dead Sea.

Anyone with half a brain knew it was a fool who tempted fate by traveling alone. It was like walking into a war zone, like taking a walk in those parts of the city best traveled in the safety of a car during the daylight hours but never at night. Folks who use their common sense know there are parts of the city that should be avoided. “So, what's a God like ours doing in a neighborhood like this one?” we might ask.

Paul the Apostle claimed, *“For our sakes God became poor,”* and theologians have given that a

name calling it the Divine Impoverishment. In the movement from the safety and security of God's power and sovereignty to the vulnerability of incarnation, God became vulnerable: hands-outstretched, willing to be beaten, killed, and crucified.

This story is not about being nice and proving who is justified by their goodness. Maybe we crack open the door of a deeper understanding and see how Christ entered human history imploring us to see the world as though Christ himself were in every moment and in the midst of every human situation.

The Samaritan outcast picks up the Wounded-God outcast and did all he could to absorb the Christ figure's pain and suffering. It's almost as if there are two losers who happen to meet in a moment of need. The Samaritan is a genetic mistake being a half-breed outcast from the purity of Jewish sensibilities of cleanliness laws. Not quite Jew, not quite Gentile, he's banished to the edges of two worlds and rejected by both. The other two are Jewish travelers who claim to have a special relationship with God but not enough of the mercy of God to stop and get involved.

Capon stretches the realms of our thinking by pushing us to think about our religion apart from the niceties of a form of faith that rewards niceness and punishes our not-niceness. He wants us to understand that Jesus didn't institute a religion comprised merely of behavioral modification but instead wants to introduce us to renewal and transformation.

So, the questioner in this story is us ... those of us who prefer to explore the limitations of love rather than seeking to live out the generosity of God. We want to know the bare minimum necessary to keep us safe in God's kingdom. We're not willing to bend over and touch the one in need, mind you, but we need to know just what it is that will get us inside God's good graces with the minimum of effort and personal expense.

What we miss in that kind of living is the exploration of mercy, both for others and for ourselves. And so, Jesus turns to us all when we ask, "How little is necessary for the salvation of our souls?" and asks us, "*What do you think?*"

The road runs through our neighborhoods and our schools and our lives. "*Who is my neighbor?*" the confused young lawyer asked and the story Jesus told that day continues to haunt us every time we come across the figure of Jesus broken and bleeding on the side of the road.

If the peaceable kingdom of God ever takes root in our world, it must first take root in our hearts. May it be so, O Lord. Amen.

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