

## The Man Who Fell Among Specialists

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 13, 1986. Scripture Lessons: 2 Kings 2:1, 6-14; Psalms 149:1-12; Colossians 1:1-14; *Luke 10:25-37*.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In February of 1979 Kay and I visited her sister, Anne, then living in New York City. It was a snowy, bitterly cold day. We were walking down a crowded street after having visited the Empire State building when I noticed a derelict. He lay sprawling at the bottom of steps that led from the side walk to a basement. One hand clutched a brown paper bag in which I guessed was a bottle of alcohol. He was clothed in a dirty black overcoat that he probably picked up at the Salvation army. In the seconds it took to walk by I thought a thousand thoughts.

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I thought of the Good Samaritan. What would he do? I thought, "But this guy wasn't beaten up and robbed. It's his own fault he's there. Maybe the command to love my neighbor extends only to innocent people who're beaten up and robbed. Maybe *my neighbor* doesn't include people who're derelicts and victims of their own poor decisions. Besides what could I do to help him; I wouldn't know where to take him or what to do with him. And if I were to stop and help now he'd probably back in some alley next week. And besides there are people in this city whose job it is to take care of derelicts like this. I'll leave it to the specialists; the Salvation Army, the doctors, the social workers."

Now probably few of you here this morning would really fault me. You'd say, "Well, you just can't stop and help every derelict you pass." We might stop to help a family with car trouble or the victim of an accident lying by the side of the road but surely our neighbor doesn't include every wino and drug addict we come across. The line has to be drawn somewhere. We

can't help everybody. The burden of the task would simply overwhelm us. We just can't all be specialists in compassion like Mother Theresa.

I have to admit that that line of thinking really makes sense to me and it really disturbs me. Most of us would have no trouble justifying what I did in New York. And worst still, I don't have much trouble justifying what I did. And that really troubles me because the main point of the parable of The Good Samaritan is this: real love, Christlike love, doesn't ask the calculating question, "Who is my neighbor?" My neighbor is whoever's in need.

Let's take a closer look at the parable and try to discover where we are in it. Our scripture lesson gives us a picture of three kinds of people. First, there are those who look at a neighbor and say, "What's yours is mine. I'll take it." That's the attitude of *exploitation*. We're all familiar with people who see others as victims rather than as human beings created in the image of God. The highways of life are filled with them and they're not always violent outlaws and ruthless muggers.

Sometimes the exploitation is subtle. A couple years ago a man started coming to church. I visited him and invited him to attend a new members classes. He asked for a membership directory which I gave to him. Soon after I learned that he was going down the list of names in the membership directory calling people to sell his product. He introduced himself as a fellow member of the church and then launched into his sales pitch. Members of the church started calling me about this. They felt they were being used. I visited the man again and requested, as politely as I could, that he not use the directory for business purposes. Unfortunately the man stopped worshipping with us. He apparently came to church only for the purpose of gaining new clients.

I recently came across another example of this attitude of exploitation that says, "What's yours is mine." I read a disturbing article by James Goff who has served as a missionary of our church in Latin America for over thirty years. He says the people of the Third World countries have fallen among thieves who have impoverished them and left them half dead. He says that the underdeveloped countries are not poor because they're in an earlier stage of development compared to the wealthy nations. These countries are poor, rather, because of the relationship they have with the wealthy nations. They were made poor. We take their raw materials and use their cheap labor. That's a troubling thought if it's true. So now whenever I buy bananas at 39 cents a pound I feel like I'm ripping off some poor Central American Indian who goes home from the banana plantation to a hovel every day after 12 hours of labor.

It's even possible to exploit people in the name of Christ. It's possible to look at a person and see them only as a potential church member rather than as a human being created in God's image who has needs and hurts that I might minister to. We're all familiar with ministers who actively promote and encourage people to leave one church and go to their own. There's an evangelistic style that sees people merely as *souls* to be won. Once they've been coerced or manipulated into making a decision for Christ they're abandoned and left half-dead.

God gave us *things* to use and *people* to love. If we start *loving* things, we'll start *using* people, and that's exploitation. We see people from the stand point of what we can get from them. Jesus Christ never exploits a person. He gives back more than He asks. We must beware of looking at someone and asking ourselves, "What can I get out of him?" That's the attitude the thieves had.

Secondly, this parable describes the one who says, "What's mine is mine, and what's yours is yours. Let's leave it that way." That's the attitude of *indifference*. That, apparently, was the attitude of the Priest and Levite. Their specialty was religion, ritual, and ceremony. They were experts in liturgy and the law, they were indifferent to everything else. They were able to make clear cut distinctions between what the church should and shouldn't do. "My speciality is the salvation of souls; not social activism. My job is to preach the Gospel and celebrate the sacraments. The church shouldn't get involved in issues of justice and oppression." So they were able to pass by the victim. They may not have been completely indifferent to his condition. But they were indifferent enough to go on their way.

I once heard that on the eve of the Russian revolution back in 1917 the Russian Orthodox church was deeply involved in a controversy regarding the size of candles to be used in worship indifferent to the oppression and poverty of the people of Russia. But we don't have to knock another church. We too often see similar controversies causing us to be indifferent to pressing human needs.

G.A. Studdert-Kennedy, was an Anglican priest and a chaplain during WWI. He was also a poet. One of his more familiar poems is entitled, "Indifference". I was delighted to discover that it's in our hymnal, selection #671. Take a look at it.

When Jesus came to Golgotha they hanged Him on a tree,  
They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary;  
They crowned Him with a crown of thorns, red were His wounds and deep,  
For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.

When Jesus came to our town, they simply passed Him by,  
They never hurt a hair of Him, they only let Him die;  
For men had grown more tender, and they would not give Him pain,  
They only just passed down the street, and left Him in the rain.

Still Jesus cried, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do,"  
 And still it rained the winter rain that drenched Him through and through;  
 The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see,  
 And Jesus crouched against a wall and cried for Calvary.

"What's mine is mine; what's yours is yours." That's the attitude of indifference. That attitude lets us pass by the hidden Christ every day. I'm sure Studdert-Kennedy is right. Jesus prefers the cross to having people simply walk by without noticing. But this can never be the attitude of men and women for whom Christ died. We're no longer our own. We've been bought by Christ. We belong to Christ. What's mine is his and what's his is mine to be used for his purposes.

The third person in our story is the Samaritan. His attitude was, "What's mine is yours. Here, take it." That's the attitude of *compassion*. He was a specialist in compassion. His heart went out in honest concern for this stranger along the road, and, without counting the risk or cost, he knelt down to minister to him. The last person you'd expect to help a Jew would be a Samaritan. But the Samaritan didn't let either racial or religious barriers keep him from helping the Jewish victim.

We don't often meet someone bleeding and unconscious by the roadside, in obvious and grievous need. Most calls to neighborliness are much less dramatic. Neighborly compassion doesn't have to wait for the desperate plight of the tragic victim. It serves in lowlier ways. It writes that letter, pays that visit, carries out that chore, issues that invitation, makes that donation-- simply and without complaint. The neighbor may not deserve help and possibly could survive without it, but the good neighbor doesn't withhold compassion. And maybe the more faithful we are in these small acts of neighborliness, the more faithful we'll be when we come across the derelicts of the world.

Several years ago, on The Lutheran Series of The Protestant Hour, the Rev. Marshall Mauney told the story of a small boy who was impressed with the shiney new car the minister drove into his neighborhood. As the boy looked at in admiring it, the minister said, "My brother gave me that car." How do you think the boy replied? I'd have the thought the boy would've said, "Gee, mister, I wish I had a brother like that!" But that's not what he said. Instead he said, "Gee, minister, I wish I could be a brother like that!" That's the attitude of The Good Samaritan. "What's mine is yours. Here, take it."

When we hear the story of The Good Samaritan what's our reply. Do we hear it and say, "Gee, I wish I had a good neighbor like that?" Or do we say, "Lord, for Christ's sake help me to be that kind of neighbor."

Amen.

Let us pray: O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that we may know and understand what things we ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.