

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, TN
Sept. 17, 2023: The Installation of the Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
The Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block, Guest Preacher
Sermon: "Take Care"

Psalm 103:1-13

*Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless God's holy name.*
² *Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and do not forget all God's benefits—*
³ *who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,*
⁴ *who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,*
⁵ *who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*
⁶ *The Lord works vindication
and justice for all who are oppressed.*
⁷ *The Lord made known God's ways to Moses,
God's acts to the people of Israel.*
⁸ *The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*
⁹ *The Lord will not always accuse,
nor will God keep God's anger forever.*
¹⁰ *The Lord does not deal with us according to our sins
nor repay us according to our iniquities.*
¹¹ *For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is God's steadfast love toward those who fear him;*
¹² *as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.*
¹³ *As a father has compassion for his children,
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear the Lord.*

Luke 10:25-37

²⁵ *An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus.^[a] "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* ²⁶ *He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"* ²⁷ *He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself."* ²⁸ *And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."*

²⁹ *But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"* ³⁰ *Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead.* ³¹ *Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.* ³² *So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.* ³³ *But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he*

saw him he was moved with compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend." ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

~

Take Care

Name that story.

Two children being raised by their lawyer-father in Alabama, learn about the evils of racism and trespass onto a strange neighbor's property.¹

A group of pre-teen baseball players try to get back a valuable ball, when it is hit across the fence into a yard guarded by a big, scary dog.²

"The Jets are Gonna Have their tonight, the Jets the way tonight."³

"I'll huff and I'll puff and I will blow your house down."⁴

Stories capture our imaginations. They can take us to far off places. They can teach us all-important lessons. They can show us our world and our neighbors in a whole new light. They can even serve as mirrors - opening our eyes to our own reflections: our shortcomings, our prejudice, the ways in which we must grow.

For this reason and more, Jesus loved telling stories. His stories - these colorful parables - brought forth metaphors, and lessons, and good news about God and neighbor in a time wrought with cruel division and abuse of power.

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Now name this story:

"A man is going down from Jerusalem when he is robbed, two people pass him by, but someone unexpected stops to *take care* of him."

¹ Answer: *To Kill a Mockingbird*

² Answer: *The Sandlot*

³ Answer: *West Side Story*

⁴ Answer: *The Three Little Pigs*

It's "The Good Samaritan," of course.

When we think about classics like "To Kill a Mockingbird" or "The Three Little Pigs," "The Good Samaritan" is certainly one of those classic Bible stories that we hear many times over in the church. *Why?*

Let's be honest, it's not that fantastic of a tale. There are no visible miracles...no angels...no loaves and fishes...not even a single mention of God. And the writing? It begins almost like the set-up of a joke: "A man walks into a bar." "A man was going down from Jerusalem."

Even still, this story means so much to so many. I can't tell you the number of fellow pastors who say it is "The Good Samaritan" story that drew them to the ministry. I have heard countless people say it is *this* story that illustrates how they feel called to live out their faith or show compassion to others, especially those different from them. Heck, the hero in this story has even made it into our daily vernacular: "that person's a good Samaritan" we say. And we know what that means: "that person is an empathetic, giving soul (a mensch, if you will)."

The Good Samaritan is indeed a simple parable, and yet we know from Jesus' track record - it is far from simplistic. With just a few verses, Jesus lays out what it looks like to care for our neighbors - those different from us and those alike.

But can a classic like this still serve as our guide all these years later? Our world today is so fractured. The wounds of COVID, prejudice, political tensions, and individualism have left us weary and far apart. Do we really have what it takes to take care of one another? Perhaps we need to bust open this story to see.

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Chapter one: The Man.

We don't know anything about *his* story - the man who was robbed. Was he a Jew or a Gentile? We can assume he was Jewish because Jesus' audience mostly was, but the truth is it doesn't say. We don't know if he was wealthy or poor. If he knew these robbers, if he had once done them wrong. We know nothing about him besides the fact that he is violently attacked and left for dead.

Could it be that Jesus does this on purpose?

Without knowing his name or background or age, he could be any of us. Surely we can resonate with his plight. We know the fragility of life - with one accident, one diagnosis, one [fill in the blank] suddenly the rug can be pulled out from under us, leaving us incredibly vulnerable, weary - even desperate.

Name these stories:

A small business owner in Libya suddenly sees his store disappear underwater.

An older couple having lived their whole lives in Kiev, are unsure of where to go.

A young adult comes out to their parents and the door is now shut.

A mom of three loses her job, and with it, her home.

A teenager looks down at her college acceptance letter and her pregnant belly.

A child is crushed by a cruel rumor sweeping the school hallways and the internet.

Stories upon stories. All real and heartbreaking. All around us. And they can feel even more bleak when there is no one willing to lend a compassionate hand...to listen...to respond.

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Chapter Two: The Priest and The Levite.

We don't know their stories either, only that they walk past this suffering man. Had they seen him before? Did they frequently greet him on this road?

Perhaps they didn't stop because they were running late for temple and if they touched a dead body (which his nearly was), they would be left ritually unclean.

Perhaps the Priest had been caring for someone else all day and he had nothing left to give. Perhaps the Levite once needed help and no one came to his rescue.

Whatever the reason, they don't want to get close enough to hear *his* story, to care for him in his hour of need. So, they create a physical barrier. They each cross the road and with their body language say "good luck and take care."

It's easy for us to judge them, right? But if we are honest with ourselves, we know that their stories could be ours. Even as we strive to be "good Christians" far too often, we create barriers between us and our neighbors - even when we mean well.

Take this story:

When Pastor Richard and I served as colleagues in Asheville, we helped support a local cafe called 12 Baskets. 12 Baskets is not your typical cafe because the food on the menu is all free, rescued food (that would have otherwise been tossed out at the end of the day from top notch restaurants).

The waiters are volunteers, and the guests who sit together at table are a mixture of folks experiencing homelessness and folks who could afford a meal like this. The idea is to connect and break bread with your neighbors - whoever they are.

I remember bringing a friend, Susan, to the cafe for the first time. When the host brought us to our table, Susan was seated beside a man with a scruffy beard, ripped clothes, eyes half opened. He seemed high and likely hadn't bathed in days. Susan was visibly uncomfortable,

inching her chair away from him.

Soon our waiter came by to take our order, but before he could speak, Susan interjected with a bright, "How can I help?"

The waiter said with a smile, "We are 'all good' on volunteers for today, thanks so much."

Susan wouldn't take no for an answer. "Put me to work in the kitchen. I want to help."

It suddenly became clear that Susan's generous offer was actually her way out. By working, she could remove herself from the table, from the one sitting beside her. Before the waiter could respond, the scruffy bearded man's eyes opened a bit wider.

He turned to her and said softly, "Afternoon. I'm Jim. So, what's your story?"

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It is much easier for us to distance ourselves from our neighbors, from one another:
to just write the check,
turn off the evening news,
ignore the kid sitting alone on the bleachers,
ask our pew mates "how are you?" and not wait for a *real* response.

I often wonder, and perhaps you do too, how many stories have we missed?
How many opportunities to care for and connect with God's beloved do we let pass us by?

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Chapter Three: The Samaritan.

Now we know something vital about his story. He is the last person Jesus' listeners expected to enter the scene, let alone to do something "good."

In ancient Israel, Jews and Samaritans were feuding neighbors [think Jets and Sharks]. They didn't interact, let alone come to each other's aid. That's why if we assume the beaten man is Jewish, this parable is all the more complex and extraordinary.

Scripture says that when the Samaritan sees this man in pain, he does not just pity him, he is moved with compassion. He recognizes the man - not as a strange or dangerous neighbor - but as a fellow human being in need of attention. He stops everything to take care of him.

We can imagine that as the Samaritan bandages his wounds, and feeds him warm soup in

the inn, he begins to ask questions: What's your name? What happened on the road back there? Where is home for you? Who is worried sick about you?

And we can imagine the with the little strength the man has, he is surprised to find himself revealing his story to this unlikely caregiver.

What's more, the Samaritan listens.

They talk deep into the night. Maybe the Samaritan discovers that they have much in common or perhaps he is being opened to a whole new world. Maybe the man feels stronger just knowing that the person before him is not only caring *for* him, but cares.

With their stories now intersected, we can certainly believe that no matter the road ahead, these neighbors are forever changed.

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Looking around the room, I wonder what could be possible if we hold this sacred story close, if we really heed God's call to care for each other here - and beyond these walls - with the depth of tenderness and generosity that the Samaritan demonstrates?

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Name this story:

A man goes down from Asheville to Knoxville to pastor a community of people seeking to love God with all their heart, soul, and mind, seeking to love their neighbors as themselves.

I could tell you a lot of stories about your new pastor - *all great*.

I have witnessed firsthand Richard's gifts for taking care of others through equipping deacons for service, leading racial justice book discussions, sitting beside those who are sick, even dying, to listen and to pray.

But perhaps my fondest memories were doing improv together. Did you know your pastor was a member of an all-clergy improv troupe called the Irreverends?

Not unlike the Good Samaritan story, longform improv requires its actors to take good care of each other. A scene begins when someone jumps out onto an empty stage and trusts that someone else will join them. You never leave anyone alone out there.

Next, the actors try to establish the relationship - who are they, where are they by making suggestions that are always affirmed by the other with the words "yes and."

By listening closely and being present to your partner, a scene begins to take shape. We

Irreverends learned quicky how to become co-creators of stories – often wacky, sometimes heartfelt, but always wholly new.

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On this installation day, you are saying “yes and” to your pastor,
and he is saying “yes and” to you.

With God’s help, think of all the wondrous new stories you will create together,
think of the extraordinary healing you can help bring to the vulnerable ones sitting beside
you, to the beloved neighbors you will encounter on the road ahead.

The truth is, friends,
God has always played a key role in today’s classic parable -
for to love God *is* to love neighbor,
to see and take care of our neighbors *is* to see and take care of our God.

We never know when we might be the man in the story,
but we do know this: we were never meant to journey alone.

In a world in desperate need of good - even great - Samaritans,
may we strive to embody Jesus’ parable,
and courageously live by its epilogue: “Go and do likewise.”