

“Going Down the Road”
Luke 10:25-37
First Presbyterian Church
July 10, 2016
Rev. Glen Bell

Life is a journey. Day-to-day, minute-to-minute, we make decisions that define our identity and values. Any given moment, any particular choice may not feel definitive. But all our decisions have a way of adding up over time.

Through our choices, will our neighbors know we are Christians by our love?

This is a terrible week in the life of our nation. Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, two African-American men, were shot and killed by police in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Falcon Heights, Minnesota. Then five police officers in Dallas were shot dead by a sniper, a man determined to kill whites.

Americans are distraught over the deaths. Protests and marches sprung up across the country in memory of Sterling and Castile. People of every age and circumstance are proclaiming that black lives matter. These tragic deaths are dreadful, and they make us wonder: In our privilege, are we blind to the challenge of life as an African-American? Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich put it bluntly, “It is more dangerous to be black in America” than white. “If you are a white American,” he said, “you . . . underestimate the level of discrimination and . . . risk.”

Americans are distraught over the deaths. People of every age and circumstance are proclaiming that blue lives matter. These tragic deaths are appalling. We hear the words of the Dallas mayor, Mike Rawlings, “Our police officers put their life on the line every day.” Chief of Police David Brown was straightforward too. “We’re hurting. We are heartbroken . . . We don’t feel much support most days.” In our privilege, are we blind to the challenge of life as law enforcement officers? With every traffic stop, each new encounter, these faithful men and women make themselves completely vulnerable in order to serve and protect us.

Our beloved nation is fractured and embittered. The Drudge Report declared in a headline that “Black Lives Kill.” Some protesters in Minnesota chanted, “Kill the police.” We are terribly divided, overflowing with anger and rage.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus declares the human experience is not fulfilled through popularity or conformity or even safety and understanding, but through faithfulness and integrity and love, a path defined by servant leadership.

This phrase “servant leadership” is important for us today, we who mourn here at pulpit, font and table, we who wonder how to respond to bitterness and rage. When Christ’s disciples were clamoring for the best position, Jesus reminded them that “whoever wishes to become great must be a servant . . . for the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life” for the world.

One helpful reminder for me, when I'm struggling day-to-day to make faithful choices, is to remember what our congregation proclaims about leadership. In our bulletin this morning, you see our mission statement. This is our first core value: "We have an ongoing tradition of leadership in the community."

We are leaders in love.

We are leaders in reconciliation.

We are leaders in justice.

We are leaders in all the Gospel values of Jesus.

As you and I seek to reflect that core value, to be leaders in our community, to heal divisiveness, to respond to anger and rage with love, to demonstrate faithful choices over time, I believe the story of the Good Samaritan has much to teach us.

In the next line of our mission statement, we read this. "We are committed to meeting the ever-changing spiritual and physical needs of our community." In short, we emulate the Good Samaritan. As followers of Jesus, we are dedicated to our neighbors, here in Sarasota, in Baton Rouge and Falcon Heights and Dallas, and around the world.

That's right. That is faithfulness, serving others, being dedicated to our neighbors. That is the journey to which Christ calls us.

But this morning I confess: Often I find the cost of such leadership too high. Although I lament the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile and five faithful police officers from Dallas, after my tears have dried and I've shared my outrage, I go back to the laundry or the Netflix movie or the errands I need to run.

God help me, I am tempted simply to turn away from the tragedies. To turn away from the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, just like the deaths of Tamir Rice and Eric Garner and Walter Scott and Laquan McDonald and so many other African-American men. To turn away from the deaths of five faithful law enforcement officers because there were already more than six hundred other officers killed in the line of duty in the last five years. Six hundred!

Is this what we do? Cry and mourn and then move on? Simply turn away?

A student of the Scriptures, an expert in the Jewish law, asked Jesus about the spiritual life. Jesus reflected the question back to him, asking his opinion. The student pointed to the Bible's admonition to love God and neighbor with wholehearted dedication, to center our choices on love.

Jesus told a story. A traveler is beaten and robbed, left half-dead in a ditch on the side of the road. A Samaritan, kind and courageous, offers him compassion.

But before we get to this Samaritan, we hear and see the responses of the religious folk, the priest and Levite, who pass by. Their responses haunt me. Their responses haunt me, because they are far too often my own responses. This week, we live in the land of the priest and the Levite.

The priest is distraught. He begins to cry from the sorrow he feels about the terrible difficulty of this man lying in the ditch. He feels so badly about the man's plight. He resolves to say something about this terrible crime to his local council representative later in the week. He is a busy person – aren't we all? – so he hurries on, upset and deeply concerned.

The Levite is tired. He has been working long and hard at the temple, assisting in worship, teaching the law. He knows that tomorrow is going to be another demanding day. So he tries not to think about the tragedy and walks by, hoping someone else will come to rescue this fellow in the ditch.

Yes, the priest and the Levite remind me of me. Sometimes I see a neighbor struggling and I think, "I am supposed to be at the hospital or at my appointment with the widow whose husband died only a few weeks ago. I don't have time."

Or I wonder: "How do I know it is safe to help this person? How do I know they are not angry or unbalanced, about to pull out a gun or a knife?"

Now please do not misunderstand me. Safety is an important value. And concern about appropriate assistance – rather than enabling misbehavior or facilitating poor choices – is both reasonable and faithful.

But frequently for me, that's not it. I feel badly, and then I don't do anything. And right now, across America, we are afraid. Police are afraid of people of color. People of color are afraid of the police. We are all afraid of each other.

We give into our fear. You and I fail to work for a new day, in which African-American men are safe from violence and in which law enforcement officers are understood and honored and protected.

You and I turn away from the teaching of the Scriptures: "You shall love the Lord with **all** your heart and **all** your soul and **all** your strength and **all** your mind, **and your neighbor as yourself.**"

Amy-Jill Levine points to the worst of it. She points us through the worst of it to the servant leadership God demands. "To hear this parable," she writes, "we should think of ourselves as the person in the ditch, and then ask, 'Is there anyone, from any group, about whom we'd rather die than acknowledge, 'She offered help' or 'He showed compassion'?' More, is there any group whose members might die rather than help us? If so, then we know how to find the modern equivalent for the Samaritan."

If so, then we know exactly the neighbors we must serve.

Sisters and brothers, she is right. And this is painful. If we find ourselves centering on the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, but not quite so moved by the deaths of the police, then the neighbors to whom God is calling us are the faithful law enforcement officers of our community. Or if we find ourselves mourning and grieving the deaths of the Dallas officers, but not quite so concerned about the loss of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, then it is the people of color of our community to whom Christ is directing us.

If we would live out the dedication of the Good Samaritan, we will renounce our fears and love the neighbors we do not at first understand or appreciate.

Perhaps our neighbor is the individual we overlook, the person we hurry by, the man or woman of a radically different background. Perhaps it is someone much younger than us. Perhaps it is the small-business owner we take for granted. Perhaps he or she is Muslim or Mexican. Perhaps it is someone with much less education than you or I. Perhaps it is the veteran who did three tours of duty in Afghanistan.

It is faithfulness and integrity and love that lead us to a place we would rather not go, into the ditch with the beaten traveler. This is our servant leadership, even as we recognize our neighbor to be far, far different from the one we would choose.

Even in this terrible week, you and I have the power to make a difference. I know you. You are insightful and energetic and determined and gifted. And you have the greatest gift of all, the Spirit of Christ, the One who gives us power and direction, the One who gives us all we need to serve and lead and love.

On the night of April 4th, 1968, riots broke out in dozens of American cities after the news of the tragic assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. But not in Indianapolis. There, Senator Robert Kennedy, making a campaign stop in his run for president, spoke to a large crowd near the corner of 17th and Broadway Streets. This is what he said after he shared the terrible news.

“My favorite poet is Aeschylus. He once wrote, ‘Even in our sleep, pain which cannot beget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.’

“What we need in the United States is not division. What we need in the United States is not hatred. What is need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness – but is love and wisdom and compassion toward one another – and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer in our country, whether they be white or whether they be black.”

Friends, life is a journey. Day-to-day, minute-to-minute, we make decisions that define our identity and values. If we are bold to serve others, even those we can only struggle to begin to understand, even in the face of fear and anger and bitterness, our neighbors will know.

They will know we are Christians by our love.