

Sermon: “Being a Good Samaritan”

5/30/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

On January 3, 2007, a man named Wesley Autrey stood on a New York City subway platform with his two daughters, ages 4 and 6. As a train approached the station, a 20-year-old man began experiencing a seizure and staggered past them before falling onto the tracks. Acting quickly, Wesley entrusted his girls to two strangers and jumped onto the tracks, hoping to pull the young man back onto the platform. But the train was traveling too fast. As the conductor hit the horn and pulled the emergency break, Wesley tackled the man between the tracks and laid on him as the train barreled overhead, less than an inch above them. The two strangers remained there, laying in filthy water and covered in grease, for nearly 40 minutes as onlookers’ screams turned into cries of wonder and applause, and as subway workers and first responders worked tirelessly to free them. Wesley’s first words upon being found: “We’re O.K. down here, but I’ve got two daughters up there. Let them know their father’s O.K.”

That day, Wesley Autrey became a national hero, and for good reason. You see, he did not know the man and he had two daughters to think about. But a human being was in desperate need, so Wesley, moved by compassion, bravery, and selflessness, put his own life at risk to do what he could. Which makes you wonder: if I had been the one on the subway platform that day, what I would have done? Would I have been as courageous as Wesley? Would I have entrusted my sons to two strangers and jumped onto the tracks with a train bearing down to save the man? Wesley became known by various names in subsequent days, including “Subway Superman,” “The Hero of Harlem,” and the “Subway Samaritan.” On that day, I can’t help but wonder: would I have been a “Good Samaritan” like Wesley, or would I have found a reason to stay

standing on the platform? Many people believe that this is the exact reason why Jesus told today's parable: to force us to question our actions and to challenge us to do better. But it seems to me that Jesus was calling on us to do more than simply do better. He was calling on us to be better.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus meets a lawyer while traveling toward Jerusalem. At the time, lawyers were responsible for knowing the Laws of Moses, and frequently as members of the Pharisees or Sadducees, they were tasked with ensuring the law was followed. By asking Jesus "what must I do to inherit eternal life," the man was seeking to expose Jesus and his message as foolish and fraudulent, much like when an attorney cross examines an opposing witness on the stand. "You're the lawyer," Jesus responds, "what is written in the law?" The man, well-versed in the Hebrew Bible, quotes Deuteronomy 6:5: "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." "There you have it," Jesus concludes, "do this, and you will live."

But the lawyer would not be so easily dismissed. Determined to "justify" his questions and actions, the lawyer asks Jesus: "who exactly is my neighbor? And be precise." It was in response to this challenge that Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, a story not so different than that of Wesley Autrey and the stranger on the subway tracks.

"One day," Jesus begins, "a man was traveling from Jericho to Jerusalem." The 18-mile journey between the two cities was notoriously dangerous, riddled with thieves who preyed upon those traveling alone and without protection. So the fact that a man was beaten, robbed, and left bleeding and near death beside the road was not surprising. "Now by chance," Jesus continues, "a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed on by the other side." So

too did a Levite, a member of the priestly class. Perhaps, the priest and the Levite avoided the man because of Numbers 19:11, which states that anyone who touches a dead body “shall be unclean seven days,” and they wanted to ensure that their priestly duties would not be compromised. And yet, doesn’t it feel as if their priorities were misplaced, that they chose their religious purity over the man’s life? Our expectation, or at least my expectation, is that these two devout, religious men should have run over to the man and helped him in whatever way possible, thus demonstrating their love of God and neighbor. Instead, it feels as if they watched the young man fall onto the subway tracks, and rather than jump down like Wesley, they simply shrugged their shoulders, turned around, and walked away. A Samaritan was the last person who would have been expected to help.

The racial and religious hatred that existed between the Samaritans and Jews began over five hundred years prior, when the Jews returned from exile. The Samaritans, now occupying the land between Judea and Galilee, had come to hate and despise the Jews, and the Jews, who considered themselves the true heirs to the Promised Land, felt just as strongly. Most Jews would not have expected help from a Samaritan if they were bleeding and near death by the side of a road, and likely would have rejected the help if offered. And yet, it was this man alone, a despised and rejected Samaritan, who had the compassion, bravery, and selflessness to help. We read that the Samaritan treated and bandaged the dying man’s wounds, lifted him onto the Samaritan’s animal, and took him to a nearby inn, so the man could continue to be treated. The costs associated with his care were substantial. Two denarii, which the Samaritan gave the innkeeper the next day, would have been enough money for two months of lodging. And the Samaritan also offered to pay whatever other expenses the innkeeper might incur. “Which of these three,” Jesus goes on to ask, “was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the

robbers?” The lawyer, unwilling to even say the word “Samaritan,” responds that it was “The one who showed him mercy.” “Go and do likewise,” Jesus declares.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan, like the rest of Jesus’ parables, raises many questions. Why did the priest and Levite not help their neighbor, when their entire lives were devoted to knowing and keeping God’s commandments? Should they have known better, or was ritual purity so important at that time that religious leaders frequently chose not to help the sick and dying? And what led the Samaritan to stay with and care for the man? Was this a one-time decision or does it reveal something profound about his relationship with God and about the ways in which God was working among non-Jews? I wish that I had the answers to these questions so that could better understand how Jesus is calling on me to live, what Jesus wants me to do. Except, what if by asking these questions I’m being just like the lawyer? What if I’m spending so much time concentrating on what Jesus wants me to do that I fail to realize who Jesus wants me to be?

When we simply focus on what Jesus wants us to do, we seek to maintain control of our lives and destiny. All that we need to do is say the right words, believe the right things, give the right amount of money, and do the right things, and we will inherit eternal life. After all, we have earned it! But therein lays the problem with simply focusing on our actions. Salvation is not something that we can earn, no matter how hard we try. It is a gift given to us by God and God alone; a gift given to those among us who seek to faithfully respond to God’s grace. When we seek to faithfully respond to God’s grace, we allow for God to work in our lives and to empower us to love God with our entire heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. Or to put it a different way, we allow for God to form us into the type of people who do not simply do what the Good Samaritan did, but be the type of people the Good Samaritan was.

We will likely never have to put our lives at risk like Wesley Autrey did on that day when he jumped in front of that subway train. We will all face moments in our lives, though, when loving our neighbor will require that we make sacrifices. My guess is that we need look no further than one day soon, when we reopen our church for in-person worship and fellowship. Let's be honest, none of us enjoy wearing face masks and remaining socially distant. We want to be able to share hugs and handshakes, to sing hymns rather than listen to recordings of them, and to come together for food and fellowship. But just because it might be safe enough for some of us to do these things—in particular, the younger, healthier members of our congregation—does not mean that it will be safe for everyone. I have a friend whose mother was recently diagnosed with stage 3 cancer. Before starting chemotherapy, she let her friends know that for the next several months she did not feel comfortable being around them if they were not yet vaccinated. Like my friend's mom, there are those among our faith community who long to join us for in-person worship and fellowship, and who wish even more than we do for the day when everything will just return to normal. But because we are still living in the midst of a pandemic, they have to take their health and the health of their loved ones into account. What sacrifices do you think that we should be willing to make for these people?

Jesus instructed the lawyer in today's Gospel lesson to "Go and do likewise." May we seek to go and do the same. May we seek to be people who demonstrate through our thoughts, words, and actions just how much we love God and our neighbor. Love which we can demonstrate through our willingness to do things like wear masks, social distance, and listen to hymns. Or to put it a different way, may we be people who seek to "Go and do likewise" because we long to "Go and be likewise." And all God's children said, amen.