

Towson Presbyterian Church

Rev. Joel Strom

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Galatians 3:23-29 and Luke 10:25-37

“Crossing the Road”

If you’ve never heard this story before in its entirety, I bet you have at least heard the phrase “The Good Samaritan.” It is a phrase that is quite embedded in our culture. We have named hospitals after the Good Samaritan and there are even Good Samaritan laws, which help health care providers and rescue personnel from being sued when they are attempting to help a victim during an emergency situation.

And even if you’ve heard the particulars and all of the players in Jesus’s parable in Luke, it’s fairly easy to domesticate it, or simplify it, and make it very straightforward and **easy** to understand.

It’s sometimes simplified in a couple ways – *“Be nice like the Samaritan was, and not rude like the clergy and religious leaders were...”* And another: *“Be helpful when you see someone who needs help on the side of the road.”* Now don’t get me wrong, these are not bad interpretations. They’re encouraging us to live in a very positive way, but there’s many more layers to this story, and we only have time for one sermon this morning.

Jesus’s parable begins – *and remember, parables are meant to make us a little uncomfortable* – begins with a lawyer who is seeking eternal life. He’s looking to deepen his relationship with God. And the lawyer gives a good answer to Jesus’ questions - the correct answer, and quotes from the Torah, the first 5 books of the Hebrew Bible: *love the Lord with all of your heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.* Jesus says, *“You’ve answered correctly. Do that and you will find life.”*

But the man then digs deeper and says, *“Who is my neighbor?”* And so Jesus tells a story.

As the assumed Jewish man lies on the side of the road, a Priest and a Levite, both highly respected Jewish religious figures, *do not* cross the road to help him, but instead keep moving along.

Now if that wasn’t a curveball, the next part of the story would have definitely been received as a curveball and produced some *uncomfortableness* when it was first told. A Samaritan crosses the road, and not only helps the Jewish man, but sees to his ongoing care until he is fully recovered. The Samaritan’s action is an extraordinary act of mercy, love and compassion.

It’s well-known that there was bad blood between Jews and Samaritans, which went back a long ways, and what’s so unexpected about this story, the big reveal that we assume the lawyer didn’t see coming, is that the Samaritan crossed the road. The person that we would least expect to

cross the road, crossed the road! It wasn't the Priest, it wasn't the Levite, which would have made sense to the lawyer. Instead, it was the Samaritan.

Which then begs us to ask the question...why? Why did the Samaritan cross the road? That's not a lead-in to a joke, but an honest and authentic question. *Why?*

If we were to take into account common human behavior, and my own observations of myself, and how we, as humans, move out of our comfort zones, the Samaritan's decision to cross the road I believe was not a spur of the moment decision.

With all the tension and the line in the sand that existed between Jews and Samaritans at the time, he did not simply see the Jewish man on the side of the road and rush over to help him, which is how we commonly read this story. Unfortunately, I don't believe we generally move from one position to another in a single moment. It takes time, patience and work.

Instead, I wonder if his decision to cross the road began to form and shift inside of him, began taking root, way before this story takes place, because he had already built a friendship with a Jewish person. A relationship had slowly been formed, and he had listened, and heard a story that was not his own, and the Jewish man had been humanized, and he discovered someone who had a family, a job, a history, and hopes, dreams, failures and moments where he had suffered in life, and moments where he had experienced joy in life.

I wonder if he had already formed a friendship with a Jewish man and he had taken the time to hear that man's story.

If so, the Samaritan had already walked across the street *before he walked across the street*.

And when he took the risk to move out of his comfort zone, a new **vantage point** from which to view life was formed inside of him. A new way of seeing the world was formed. For the first time...*and maybe for the first time*, he got a glimpse of someone else's vantage point and how they experience life, and what they were born into, and how they were shaped and molded by their culture, and what belief systems were formed in them.

Something happened to the Samaritan to get him to cross the road, but I don't think it was a spontaneous or thoughtless decision.

I've heard this metaphor before of how we all view and understand God – it's like a bowl of fruit. If we're all sitting around the table and there's a bowl of fruit sitting in front of us, we will view that bowl of fruit in different ways. While maybe a pear is the primary fruit from my vantage point, for whoever's sitting across me it's an orange. From whoever's sitting beside us it's an apple. And even if we're both looking at a pear, it's different. It's sitting in a different way; the light is hitting it in different ways, which is changing our vantage point.

Even though we all share some very core beliefs about God and the life of faith, which brings us together and unifies us, I'm also aware that we differ. We all have different experiences and we

were formed, since we were young, in different ways that shape who we believe God to be. We each see the bowl of fruit in our own way.

This metaphor can also be applied to our own lives as well, and the vantage point with which we see and experience life.

Have you ever sat down with someone and heard their story, and it was very different than yours and life was opened up in a new way for you? *Have you ever experienced that?* It can really be a life-changing moment when we are given the gift to view life from another's vantage point.

My friend Alan said this to a group I was a part of recently. He said *the shortest distance between two people is a story*. Have you ever experienced that, when you heard someone's story and something changed in you?

I'll be transparent with you and share a couple experiences in my life where I attempted to see life from another's vantage point. The first was my brother, Adam, who in college sat me down one day and told me he was gay. He told me what it was like during middle school and high school to know if he came out he wouldn't be accepted, either at school or at church. And I heard his struggle; I heard his desire to be accepted. I heard his sense of relief by coming out. I heard his story, and it changed me.

When I served as a chaplain at a hospital in New Jersey, we had a growing number of Muslim doctors and residents who desired a Friday prayer service, which they called Jumma. We already offered daily Catholic Mass and a monthly Protestant service, but nothing for our Muslim staff. My supervisor asked me to meet with a small group of Muslim residents and see if together we could organize a weekly Friday Jumma prayer. When I first met with them, I think they were as nervous as I was, but slowly relationships began to grow, and if I'm honest, this was my first real experience of a genuine relationship with a Muslim. I heard their story and they heard mine.

Finally, two of my chaplain colleagues, Lynn and Joy, were African-American women, and for about a solid month during my residency, our group of chaplains engaged in multiple discussions surrounding race, and again, for the very first time, I heard someone's story who I was in relationship with, who was African-American. And my eyes were opened in a whole new way. And something interesting happened too, as I heard Lynn and Joy's stories, which were so different than mine: I was able to put words to *my story* in a way that I hadn't before. In hearing their story, I learned something about my story.

Today we are inviting you to join us in our study of the book *Waking Up White – Finding Myself in the Story of Race* by Debby Irving. It's being sponsored by our Mission Outreach and Adult Spiritual Formation Committees, however, the suggestion to read this book did not originate with them. The Presbytery of Baltimore has been encouraging congregations to have conversations surrounding race for a couple years now, and the two Co-Moderators of the PC(USA) have encouraged the denomination to read this book, and meet together, *and wrestle with it*.

What I like about Debby Irving's book is that she has taken the journey to try and understand the vantage point, the view from which life is often experienced, by African-Americans. She's

walked across the street, and in taking those steps, her eyes were opened to the world in a whole new way. And her eyes were also opened to her own life, and her own vantage point, in a whole new way.

Discussion surrounding race is not easy. I get it. But the church of Jesus Christ, we are called to announce the nearness of God's kingdom and the good news of God's love, which is for everyone. God's kingdom brings good news to all who are impoverished, to all who are oppressed, and proclaims the Lord's favor upon everyone.

And so how can we then be a community of faith that promotes racial healing? How can we be that kind of community of faith.

We start by crossing the road and hearing stories through a different set of eyes than our own.

I now invite Dotsie Bregel to come forward. Dotsie is one of TPC's members, and this morning will offer a testimony of her experience reading *Waking Up White* and how it impacted her.

For those of you who don't know much about my husband Ross or me, I'll share that our first two children (Matt and Jessica) are adopted from South Korea. Seven and a half months after Jess arrived from South Korea, I gave birth to our youngest son Jon. Jon is dating a young Chinese woman who lives in China and Jess dates African American men and many of her friends are African American. Regarding race, I thought I was pretty open-minded and caring.

*Over the past several years I've read six books, five non-fiction and one fiction to help me better understand the African American culture. I've felt much improved in the racial awareness arena and thought I was doing my part for peace, until I read *Waking Up White*.*

I was stopped dead in my tracks and have been challenged since. This book helped me better understand what white privilege is all about. It's written from a white person's perspective who is wholeheartedly devoted to making a difference in racial relations. She's Boston born and raised, is raising her own family, loves her husband and kids, teaches, is very down-to-earth and makes you feel connected to her through her life experiences. In a brutally honest way, she shares experiments, conversations, and situations where white and black people interact. She awakened me to the subtleties and unconscious behaviors I've used, but now recognize that I continue to be a part of the problem. She shares her stories and research in a most personal way, one that helped me see myself right in the midst. Her book continues to work on me.

*Reading and discussing this book is one way TPC can do our part to improve racial and ethnic relations. One must first be open to reading *Waking Up White*, and if you do, I guarantee you'll be moved and humbled by it. Books are on sale in Thompson Hall for a minimal price of \$5.00. Everyone is encouraged to join a small group when you purchase the book. They will be offered weekdays and evenings and on Sunday morning in January. It's best if the book is read prior to the small groups, but it isn't necessary. The author was wise enough to incorporate questions to ponder at the end of every chapter so be prepared to discuss.*

Dotsie Bregel

