

On the Jericho Road

Maybe when you heard it for the first time, you were just a kid in Sunday school. Chances are that if you've been a Christian for most of your life, you've probably heard and read this parable of Jesus many times. Like the twenty-third psalm and the Lord's Prayer, it's one of those scriptures that's become engrained in your consciousness. It's marked out pathways in your mind, causing you to reflect on it and respond to it in particular ways, because it's so deeply familiar. But my prayer for you this morning is that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, your ears may be opened to hear it in a way you've never heard it before.

Someone once observed that a parable of Jesus is like a precious stone. Each one is a gem that's been cut with the skill and art of the Master jeweler's hand. When we're presented with one of these multi-faceted parables, we're drawn to it. We consider it. Touch its surfaces. Feel its weight. Turn it around. Turn it over. Study it from different angles. Hold it up to the light—the Light that's come into the world. Examine it from a

new perspective. That's how I want to look at this parable with you during this time together. From a new perspective.

And to do that, I invite you today, when you hear me using first-person pronouns like "I" and "me" and "my," to imagine that the words and recollections you're hearing aren't mine at all, but the words and recollections of a man. A man we meet in this gospel narrative. A man who might introduce himself and begin his story by saying something like this.

You probably have some questions about me. Maybe you're wondering what I look like. Through the centuries, portraits of me have been created by celebrated painters like Delacroix and Van Gogh. And not so very long ago, a picture of me appeared on the cover of *The Upper Room*—sketched by an artist of *your* day and *your* country. Of course, these portraits are only what an artist *thinks* I might have looked like. As for what I *really* look like, well, I'll leave that to your imagination.

You see, I'm from another time and another place. You don't know my name. But I'll leave that to your imagination, too. My name really isn't important. Because what happened to me could have happened to anybody.

That day started out just like any other. I live in the capital city—in Jerusalem. It was a time of year when I'd go to see my brother, the one who lives in Jericho. And of course, that meant I had to take the Jericho road. Now this road is nothing like your interstate highways. As a matter of fact, it's one of the *worst* roads in my country. It's a steep, sloping, twisting, turning road that drops thirty-three hundred feet in the seventeen miles between Jerusalem and Jericho. I'd been down this rocky, winding road before. Every time I walked its length to visit my brother.

Of course, seventeen miles might not seem like a long way to you. But for me, it's a hike. A day's journey. I'd brought a little money, enough for a meal at a small inn along the road.

The Jericho road. I'd heard all the rumors about that road. Heard that around every bend lurked thieves and thugs, waiting to fall on unsuspecting travelers. I'd heard it was a dangerous stretch of road.

Now you know, I'm not the biggest or the strongest guy in the world. But I've stayed in shape. Even though I'm not as young as I used to be, I'd always thought I could take care of myself. Besides, you think of those kinds of things happening

only to *other* people. You never think it could happen to you. I never thought it would happen to me. But it did.

They came up behind me. They were on me before I even saw them. One of them snatched my money belt and tore off my outer garments. Another one bent my arm behind my back until we both heard the bone snap. As I screamed, the third knocked me down and straddled me, beating my face with his fists and pounding my head on the stones in the roadbed.

I'd passed out from the pain even before the three of them threw me, in my underwear, into a ditch. And then took off. So I don't know how much time had passed when the sound of footsteps brought me back to consciousness. Through blurred vision, I could make out the figure of a priest—I could tell by his vestments. I felt a stirring of hope—surely this man of God would help me. But he didn't. He actually crossed to the opposite side of the road, to avoid coming anywhere near me! I heard him mutter something that sounded like *unclean, unclean*. When he saw me there in the ditch, he thought he was seeing a corpse.

Not too much later, another set of footsteps roused me again. A Levite, by his distinctive apparel. A priest's assistant. A

layperson. I figured he, too, was on his way back from Jerusalem, from something like what you might call a district meeting or Annual Conference.

But he did the same thing as the priest. When religious people, both lay and clergy, crossed to the other side of the road, all hope left me. I was going to die right here on the Jericho road. The universe of pain began to fade away, along with everything around me.

It might have been a few moments. Or it might have been a few *hours* that have passed. When I come to, hands are touching me. Strong hands, yet gentle. These hands, putting soothing medicine on my wounds. These hands, putting clean bandages on my wounds and a splint on my arm. Powerful arms lifting me, putting me on the back of a donkey. A voice full of compassion, telling me that I'm going to be all right.

Next thing I know, I'm being carried into an inn. Not the inn where I'd planned to stop—the kind of place you'd call a Super Eight. No, this is a larger, nicer inn—more like one of your Hiltons.

Inside, these same hands, laying me on a comfortable bed. Then the owner of the hands saying these words to the

innkeeper: *Here are two pieces of silver. Take care of him, and when I come back I'll reimburse you for anything else you spend.*

That's when I finally open my eyes. And think they're playing tricks on me. Because this person who's cared for me, who's picked me up out of a ditch and brought me here? He's a *Samaritan!* Can you believe it? Well, maybe *you* can, because you've gotten used to hearing the words *good* and *Samaritan* used together. In the church, this account has come to be known as the parable of the Good Samaritan.

But in my culture, that's an oxymoron. Where I come from, those words *good* and *Samaritan* just don't go together. Not one little bit.

As you've probably figured out, I'm a Jew. Now Jews and Samaritans don't get along. Not at all. It started hundreds of years ago when Jews in the northern kingdom intermarried with *Gentiles*. Their ethnically mixed descendants—Samaritans—worship on a mountain. They *don't* worship at our holy temple in Jerusalem. Jews and Samaritans despise one another. Anyone in my time would have been amazed—shocked!—that a Samaritan would stop, would go out of his way, to help *me*, a

Jew! But that's exactly what this Samaritan did. On the Jericho road.

You know, this story of what happened on that road—*my* story—is told by Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, who with this story cautions us about fearing and bearing enmity toward a whole group of people because they are different from us and their worship is different from ours. Jesus, who shares this story after a legal expert says to him: *I know the law says I am to love my neighbor. But who is my neighbor?*

What he's *really* asking is: *Just exactly where does my responsibility for being neighborly stop?*

In response to the lawyer's question, Jesus tells about a Samaritan—who was a neighbor to me—to illustrate what a neighbor does. And to illustrate what being a neighbor looks like. Jesus wants to be sure we understand that our neighbors include people who don't live right up the street or just around the corner. And Jesus shatters our expectations when he lets us know that neighbors don't always look or dress or speak the way we expect them to look or dress or speak.

The thing is, for Jesus, the question really isn't: *Who is my neighbor?* The question is: *To whom can I be a neighbor?*

Jesus told us how to be a neighbor. He *showed* us how to be a neighbor. And in our own day and time, he's *still* showing us. He breaks down every barrier we human creatures erect to exclude one another. He crosses every boundary we set up.

You'll find Jesus in the most unlikely places. You'll find him with the alien and the addicted. You'll find him with the hungry and the homeless. You'll find him with the least and the lost. You'll find him with the destitute and the despairing and the desperate. You'll find him in the cancer ward and in the psychiatric hospital. With a heart of compassion, he ministers in *all* these places. With love that has no limits, Jesus is a neighbor to suffering people. Because he knows what it is to suffer.

I suffered, too. But I was taken to a place of recovery. That's where you get your final glimpse of me.

But what about you? Were you once like me? With all that was in you, had you struggled? And in the end, been overpowered? Did you wind up in a ditch you couldn't get out of on your own, couldn't climb out of by yourself? Were you battered and bleeding?

Did Christ Jesus come to you? Did he show you mercy, unfailing mercy? Did his caring hands—his *pierced* hands—

tenderly touch your wounded places, your hurting places, your broken places? Did he enfold you in his arms and pick you up and bring you to a place of healing?

If your answer to any of these questions is *yes*, then you've been neighbored by Christ himself. Christ who calls you now to follow him. To seek to be more like him. To grow into his likeness. To live a life in him—a life that has no end.

Life everlasting. Today he tells you how to receive it. Today he tells you about a Samaritan who truly was a neighbor. Who showed mercy. Today, as Christ sends you out these doors, he charges: *Go and do likewise*.

Will you? Will you be a neighbor to the ones who need your love and your care this week and this month and this year, wherever your journey on the Jericho road may take you? Will you be a neighbor to them?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.