

## MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

### “The Good Samaritan”

Luke 16:19-25

I asked Marvin to read that scripture from Luke's Gospel today, the parable of the Good Samaritan because I used the right of the preacher today.

If you looked at the title of the sermon when you got here, you may have assumed that we were focusing on comedy you won't get an opportunity to look at the quote on the front pf your bulletin today, we will save that for another time, there is a time for humor and there is also a time to be serious and we need to be serious this morning. Let me share another passage from Luke's gospel which runs along the same lines as the parable of the Good Samaritan. It comes from chapter 16 in Luke's gospel beginning with verse 19.

*There was a rich man dressed in purple and fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table, even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime, you received your good tidings and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are the one in agony.'*

I think we needed to shift gears a little bit this morning and I wanted to talk about something that happened this week; but before we get into that, let me share a story from my past. It comes from a time when I was a graduate student in Seminary, I was 23 or 24 years old, studying to be a pastor of course and came up with this idea. If I wanted to be a minister, one of the things that might help me along the way would be if I experienced homelessness from a homeless person point of view, to try to get a taste of life from their particular perspective. So my idea was to spend a few nights at a homeless shelter and not as one serving the homeless but as a homeless individual myself.

I talked one of my friends into sharing the experience with me. We presented the idea to one of my seminary professors who quickly turned it into a class project. He said, 'This is what you are going to do, you are going to stay in a homeless shelter where you will be homeless for a week and I'm going to notify the administrator of the housing here on campus and tell them that if you show your face around here during this particular week, you'll be escorted off the property as a vagrant and a trespasser. I'll give you a couple dollars to put in your pocket and all you will have are the clothes on your back. I'll drive you downtown and let you out and you'll be on your own. If you call your friends, you'll get a failing grade, unless of course your life is in danger.'

We agreed to those terms because we wanted to experience this and he was gracious enough or antagonizing enough to drive us downtown. I was living in Denver at the time and he dropped us off on a city street corner and we were hit with that hard reality that we needed to find a place to stay or we would be sleeping in the streets that night. We made our way to a homeless shelter, we went through the motion of registering and signing up and agreeing to abide by their rules so they would provide us with a bed and with a meal. We, in turn would do chores for them around the building.

In a couple days we got acquainted with a number of people who were living there. It was all across the board in terms of individuals. There were folks there who had alcohol problems, or drug addiction, some were there because of criminal activity, others were there because they had been in abusive relationships and needed to get away and others had lost all their possessions and had gotten to the point in that point in their lives. They accepted us as one of their own but realized that we weren't very street smart and didn't know how to survive and they began to do with us what we wanted to hear from them but what they gave us came as a complete surprise. In some sense it felt like being a prisoner in a penitentiary because what was going on was, the hardened criminals were teaching the inexperienced criminals how to become better criminals and here in that homeless shelter the same thing was happening. We were taught survival skills but we were being taught how to take advantage of the system, how to exploit social service agencies, how to get as much as we possibly could for the least amount of effort.

One of the lessons--so to speak--included what to do with churches. I listened as a group of these individuals told us that the best target is a small church because usually there is just one pastor on duty and they don't have the where-with-all often to do some investigation and do some back ground checking. To check out the particular story that you might bring forth and you'll usually walk out of that study with a certificate to a grocery store which you can use to buy your beer or cigarettes or you can walk out sometime with cash.

The lesson piece that really got me during this was how we learned to get cold cash in a hurry if we needed it. Their advice was to go to work on Sunday morning to arrive at a church right before the worship services begin or right after they ended. Then to try to find the pastor or to ask member of the congregation to help find that pastor because that individual would be busy, of course, trying to move from one worship service to the next perhaps or moving to a classroom as there would be a lot going on with distractions. So at that point on that day, they are a lot more likely to reach into their back pocket and give you a \$5, \$10 or \$20 and then you can move on down the road to the next church.

I don't think that my mouth was open but it was an eye opening experience. There was something else that the seminary professor, Ed \_\_\_\_\_, a great guy gave to us as he let us out on that street corner. He gave to us a passage of scripture and it was the story of the Good Samaritan. He said to us, 'every now and then, I want you to read the part about the priest and the levi. Those two who walked by on the other side to see what part of the priest and the levi might apply to you in your experience with the homeless.'

I say this today because I need to turn to that passage this week for support. I don't know if you were watching the news on Wednesday night but there was a story on one of our

channels that was one of the featured stories of the evening. It was about Meridian Street Church or about something that happened here and in today's paper in the religious section there was also an article in the newspaper about that and since it is public knowledge, let me read a part of this story. *A man wanted on a murder charge in Louisiana was returned to that state on Friday after being arrested this week in Indianapolis, where he and his girlfriend lived as hurricane Katrina evacuees --receiving government and charitable assistance. The man was arrested Wednesday by a task force, led by U.S. Marshalls at an apartment where he and his girlfriend lived near 54th and Illinois streets where a local church had helped them get back on their feet said U.S. Marshall Tom Casell This man and his girlfriend came to Indianapolis last Fall after a warrant was issued about a week after Katrina devastated the gulf coast. The warrant was in connection with a 2004 homicide. Casell said this man didn't resist when confronted by the task force which also included officers from the Indianapolis Police, Marion county Sheriffs and Marion county probation department, as well as Federal agents with the bureau of alcohol, tobacco and firearms. The couples apartment provided by Meridian Street United Methodist church appeared to be stocked with food and comfortably furnished Mr. Casell said. The couple were living there with an infant.*

When hurricane Katrina hit, we were like a lot of other churches all across the country. We gave of our resources, we gave of our money, we donated, YOU donated thousands of dollars, we gave money to the United Methodist Committee on Relief, we gave money to ourselves to help utilize two of our rental properties that we were going to provide for free, with all utilities and all of that to 2 families who we were going to be able to help. After a background check with those agencies 2 families came forward for us to help and support and to nurture. Some of you did the painting in those houses; some helped lay down new carpeting, others of you donated furniture, completely furnishing two houses. One member of our church even furnished an automobile, had hundreds of dollars of repairs done to it, and donated the car to the family. I know that one group in this church decided to stock both refrigerators with food; other people provided meals and from time to time have taken meals to those families. During December, we provided financial resources so that they could experience a wonderful, wonderful Christmas together. And then we hear this story. It reminds us that when we put forth our best efforts, there are going to be times when our attempts to wrap our arms around people with compassion will wind up a little bit differently than we had anticipated and hoped for

This isn't anything new to MSUMC or isn't anything new to any other congregation in that respect. Some of you are old enough to remember that in the 60's, 70's and 80's, we had adopted an African nation, so to speak, the nation of Zaire, that's now called the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We had several prominent physicians in this congregation who made trips to Zaire, discovered the deplorable medical conditions in that country and convinced our church to jump in head first to do whatever it could to improve that health of that country or a region of it and so we poured in thousands of dollars through the years to one particular hospital, a number of health clinics, nurses and doctors volunteered to go over on work trips to provide their expertise. Money was raised; equipment was either donated or purchased to help the professionals over there to do the right kind of treatment and diagnostic procedures. Time had passed and the political situations in countries change, civil wars took place, uprisings occur. Corruption can overcome the compassion and in Zaire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo at one point in time, this is exactly what happened. All the clinics that

we supported are now gone and in some respects, the health care system in Ziarie, The Democratic Republic of the Congo

When we first became involved in a program, created by ourselves called Operation Classroom, the goal was to go to the countries of Liberia and Sierra Leone and build classrooms, train teachers and stock those classrooms with all the things students would need; desks, chairs, paper, pencils and on and on and on. Our children made little kits to give to children who would attend the classrooms in those two countries but again time marched on, political difference evolved, civil wars broke out, the economies of both those countries completely collapsed. As for our Operation Classroom, every single school we built, every class room that we had stocked was stripped and torn down and in some respects the educational system in those two countries is worse now than it was when we began ten years ago. The corruption has overcome the compassion. It can happen on the scale of our individual lives as well.

I can remember the time about ten years ago when a woman came to me who was in dire need of some assistance and we spent some time together talking about her particular situation. She had a brother in North Carolina who was dying of cancer and her one wish was to be able to see him before he died. We didn't have any money in our benevolent fund at that time and I made arrangements through the Greyhound Bus depot downtown to make a ticket available for her. I volunteered to take her down to the bus station and I can still remember her standing on Illinois Street, right across from the house that was raided this past week, waiting for a bus to go by. I felt good about that. I had helped someone in need. Five years ago watching the news, one night, around Christmas time and the reporter was doing a story about how peoples compassion tends to increase during the holidays. They were interviewing some individuals who were helping and they were interviewing some individuals who were in need, and who do you suppose was one of those individuals in need? It was that same lady. I moved closer to the TV. What was she going to say and what did she say? I have a brother who is dying in North Carolina.....he has cancer.....I would like to see him before he passes and I need money for a bus ticket. It was a time when I needed to pull that story about the Good Samaritan out and read about what was happening with the priest and levite. That is a good question to ask. What do we do? What are we called to do as Christians?

In terms as to what has happened with our Katrina family, I will say we are working with the police, we are working with the housing authority here in Indianapolis, we've had several meetings with the young lady who was involved with this and when we feel we have gathered enough information, we will make a decision, I will make a decision and it will be a decision that represents the interest of MSUMC but it will also be a decision that will be as compassionate as can be, to the people who have been involved and touched by this terrible, terrible experience.

But it still begs the question how does something like this affect our faith? If corruption can overtake compassion, can something like this begin to erode the faith that we have and..... to other individuals? This is what the story about the rich man and Lazarus is about in one sense because if you read the story, you have this individual who is committed to not helping the poor. What makes it even more dramatic

is that he expresses a great deal of contempt for anyone in that situation. You get the impression from the story that he had been like that his whole life but it is quite possible this wasn't the case but that he was an individual who had resources and opportunities to serve and did so. Maybe those opportunities didn't work out and maybe he was conned and maybe the individual he helped didn't live up to his expectations. Whatever the reasons, perhaps his soul was darkened to the point that not only would he refuse to help people, but also he held them in contempt. THAT WILL NOT happen to us through this experience.

We can look to the parable of the Good Samaritan and the same thing is happening. When Jesus is talking to this individual, telling that story, he asks this simple question, 'who is the neighbor in this story?' The response that comes back is the one who came back but in terms of the priest and in terms of the Levite that passed by, you know we assume things. It is quite possible that they two had been individuals who had helped others before and maybe they had had unpleasant experiences along the way and because of that, their course in life now was to move to the other side and to completely ignore. We can walk by once but when we walk by twice, it gets a little easier and when we walk by the third time, it becomes even easier yet, until finally we are no different than the rich man, not only won't help but look upon anyone who is in a terrible situation with absolute and complete contempt.

There is a bit of folk wisdom that says, "Fool me once, shame on you.....fool me twice, shame on me. We are going to be fooled again, not once, not twice, not three times but it will happen again and again and again. We have every right to be angry, we can be disappointed, we can even be cautious but we are going to be a lot wiser, aren't we? What we can't be again is the individual who resolves not to help at all and holds people in absolute contempt. What we need are some success stories, we talk a little bit about how we gave our best efforts and sometimes those best efforts don't always come through for a variety of reasons. We're good at telling those stories but remember the times when we have wonderfully succeeded in our efforts to show compassion, when the corruption has not overtaken the compassion at all.....when compassion has won hands down.

Some of you may know that in Liberia this week, a new president was inaugurated; Condoleeza Rice and Laura Bush were there representing the United States. The new president is a Harvard educated, United Methodist but a black Liberian who loves her country and the Methodist church. She has vision and determination and my guess is that we're going to be getting material again about "Operation Classroom" and our children are going to spend some of their Sunday school time once again stuffing little school bags with pencils, paper, books and whatever else those school children will need. I believe this will happen. The corruption hasn't overtaken the compassion in Liberia, not if we try again.

Let me tell you and end on this personal story that gives us hope and reminds us that we do fulfill and live the vision of Christ and that means that sometimes we win and sometimes we lose. Somebody from this congregation told me this week that mercy and compassion require hard work. Another person from this church, this week, was telling me that he had come across an individual who had a great IQ, had outstanding SAT scores, was a brilliant individual and so one of our church members paid the tuition to help this individual go to college. After awhile things didn't work out so well and now that young man is employed by the sanitation department here in Indianapolis, plus he is emptying trash cans somewhere in

the downtown area. I asked him, if the circumstance were right, would you do this again? He said if the circumstances were right and the stars were lined, sure I'd do it again. I've got to believe that kind of feeling, this kind of thought comes from a faith background. Someone who has come to understand in a profound and intimate way that Christ.....

When I was here in the 1980's, I was the Youth Pastor and had just received word that I was appointed to a new church as the lead pastor. There was a several month period between when I would leave and assume the new job. One day I got a phone call from an individual and Dorothy Scott, who is our church organist, was our secretary back in those days, buzzed my office and said there was someone here to see me. He introduced himself and said that my name is John so and so, I'm a member of Cumberland Methodist Church. I just want to be the first to welcome you to your new congregation. Then he launched into a long song and dance about how hard life had been for him and how he needed help with this and that and he was calling and asking if it would be possible for me to make a loan to give him a certain amount of money. I told him that I would get back to him. I called the man who was still pastor of the church at the time and when I mentioned the man's name, all the pastor did was groan and moan and he said "You will hear from him week after week, after week, after week. If you give money, he'll come back, he'll be with you again and again and so you are on your on because I'm out of here. Well eventually, John came to my office and explained a situation where he needed some money and I gave him some help. I also made arrangements for a cleaning lady to go to his house to clean because his wife was ill and needed some special medicine; we made arrangements through a pharmacy and through some church members to pay for that medicine ourselves. This went on for six years. If it wasn't money for medicine, it was to fix a lawn mower, gas for the car. On and on and on this went. I was told again and again that I was being foolish, that I was wasting my money; I was throwing the church's money away.

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I was transferred to another church, a couple years went by and John called me and I groaned and moaned, my land, he has found me. When he walked into my office ( I don't know if you have ever seen the Sienfeld show where that man George had a wallet stuffed with so much stuff that he had a hard time sitting down). He said, "I want to settle something with you" and he pulled that wallet out and it was filled with money. He started putting bills on my desk and he said "I've come to settle up and thank you." His wife had passed away and now he was able to take care of himself. He had the financial resources, not only to do that but also to begin paying back not only myself but all the people who had helped him during the years. What we did not know is that he had kept an accounting of every time that he had come to ask for assistance. That is why we continue to open our arms. If another hurricane happens or an earthquake takes place, if there is a tornado in Indiana and we can help people who have lost everything, we will do it again; I can guarantee you that there are going to be times when we are disappointed but OH for those times when we succeed when we help someone's life grow and flourish. Oh, for those times!!!!!!

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