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## MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

### **THE THEOLOGY OF STARBUCKS: THE LANGUAGE OF VENTI**

*Luke 10:30-37*

This month we are looking at what we might learn from the giant coffee company, Starbucks. Last week I shared that the CEO of Starbucks, Howard Schultz, considers himself the Chief Evangelist Officer of the company and he describes himself as a “coffee evangelist.” This company takes its coffee very seriously.

We gather this morning to take our faith very seriously. We are the evangelists of Jesus Christ and we come together this morning to offer our gratitude and our praise. May we offer at the very least “grande” or better yet, “venti” praise for our God!

Have you ever tried to go into a Starbucks and order a small coffee? Paralysis may set in. The people behind the counter will not know what to do. Small is not an option at Starbucks. There are “bloggers” on the internet who speak of ordering a small coffee at Starbucks and claim that they have not been served. There is a language in Starbucks and small coffee is not included in the lingo. You may order a tall, or a grande, or a venti, but not a small. Small is not in the Starbucks vocabulary.

We live in a culture that has agreed to learn the language of Starbucks. You may not be a customer, however, according to Bruce Horowitz in an article printed in USA Today last year. He wrote: “Twenty-four percent of Starbucks’ customers visit sixteen times per month.” (May 19, 2006) This is a remarkable reality. Starbucks has created a whole new language and its customers have accepted the challenge of learning that language. And not only that, Starbucks has created a culture that draws people in over and over and over again. The lingo of Starbucks is a language that we have readily mastered.

Starbucks has its very own language. So does Christianity. Which language do you know better? Which language do you use more often? Which language is foundational to your living?

A man was walking down the road. It was on this road that a man was robbed and beaten and left for dead. This is a very familiar passage of scripture and it is often used to instill guilt.

You know exactly what I mean. Preachers love to take a passage and make the listener feel belittled. My guess is that all of us have had an opportunity to help someone in need lately and we may have chosen to avoid or just plain ignore that opportunity. What a great opportunity to drive home the guilt. However, I am a guilt free zone, so on that count, you are safe with me. The people of God are called to share their resources, their compassion and their mercy, but guilt, as far as I am concerned, guilt can stay on the shelf.

When we hear this story, we want to envision ourselves as the good one in the story. The one who goes out of his way to offer compassion to a stranger. We all dream of being the one who is not afraid to be the Good Samaritan and we all know how good it feels when we offer compassion, when we share of our bounty with another in need.

Most middle class, prosperous Americans like us prefer to be in the position of the one who offers comfort and aid rather than the one who is the recipient. It has to do in part with a sense of having control over our lives, but I think it also grows out of our understanding of Jesus' intent that his followers are generous and caring. We prefer to relate to the one in the passage who offers aid. When we hear accounts in the news of people in places like New York or Los Angeles who avoid someone who is in need, or crowds that watch a person being victimized, we think to ourselves that we would never be like that. We would never be like the priest or the Levite in the story.

We are repelled by the two who avoid the man on the side of the road. Yet, the priest and the Levite may have sensed danger. What if helping the man on the side of the road brought harm to the one providing aid? Risk was involved then, just as risk is involved now.

Risk, apathy and violence are all part of the language and reality in this nation. And we see in this passage and in the newspapers of the apathy or the conscious choice of individuals to avoid assisting someone in trouble, neighbor or not.

An estimated 38 New Yorkers observed a 45-minute ordeal which resulted in the murder of a woman several years ago. Of the three dozen people who came to their windows and saw her cry out in terror, not a single one came to her assistance.

Similar cases abound. At least 30 people watched a man beaten and stabbed to death by a stranger in New York's Central Park (Daily Sentinel- Tribune, Bowling Green, OH, August 25, 1980, p. 17). Although repeatedly stabbed, of the 40 observers only a few who saw the attack tried to locate the police, and then only after some time elapsed. The officers rushed to the scene to find the murderer still beating his victim.

In another case, Andrew More Mille was stabbed in the stomach in front of 11 other riders as he rode the train home from work. The 17-year-old boy bled to death; those who observed the homicide simply went on their way, seemingly nonchalant about the event.

We pray that we are incapable of such a response. We loathe the priest and the Levite who walk past by the one in need. Yet, we have in our world treacherous roads. They may not lead from Jericho to Jerusalem, but they are dangerous all the same. There are dangerous roads in every big city and in this city. Try as we might, we do our best to create a life where we will never be the victim and for the most part, we also avoid placing ourselves in the position to be the Good Samaritan.

Our culture has its own language. It includes fear, apathy, and violence. It is a language all too familiar to us.

Far more important, though, than the language of our culture, is the language of our faith. I find it curious that we have learned so well the language of the world around us as well as the language of a coffee company, but we seem reticent to learn the language of our own faith tradition.

A man walked down a dangerous road and was robbed and beaten and left for dead. Considering that we are all broken in some way or other, that we are all in need of God's mercy and grace, we find in this story the truth of our own life and faith. We have ventured into this life; have been battered and bruised and at times felt like we have been left on the side of the road. If we have never felt this way, than quite possibly we live in a state of denial, because we are all in need of mercy. The ultimate Good Samaritan is not any one of us. Ultimately, the one who offers mercy is our living and loving God who scoops us up from the side of the road, who binds our wounds and shelters us. It is our God who heals our brokenness and gives us a second chance. We will never fully understand the power of divine love in our lives until we understand that we are the ones on the side of the road. We will never fully appreciate the grace of Jesus Christ until we see that we were left for dead and he carried us to safety. It is a piercing understanding of our dependence upon our God. It is a breathtaking realization that apart from God we are as good as dead.

The language of this story, the language of our faith tradition is mercy. There is nothing small or insignificant in this language, but rather it is mercy in the venti size. It is not a mercy we deserve, but mercy that is a gift and a blessing. The language of this story is compassion. God reaches out and lifts us up, we are cared for completely and eternally. The heart of the language of this story and of Christianity is salvation. Through the grace of the Resurrection we are forgiven for what has been and blessed for what will be. We are loved for who we are and loved for who we are becoming. We are healed from our brokenness and made whole. We are empowered to live out the power of God's spirit within us. We are the ones blessed and only when we fully discover that truth will we become the blessing that we are called to be as the disciples of Christ. As we find ourselves fully dependent upon God, we are finally fully realized as a child of God and fully empowered by the spirit of God.

The language of our faith invites us to think big, to live big. Starbucks understands thinking big – they have venti thinking. The people of God are called to think big as well. We are the people of venti thinking. We were left for dead and are now restored. We were once no people, but now we are God's people and with God all things are indeed possible. Our faith tradition offers us more than simple comfort; it empowers us to live life to the fullest. We are not a people of small dreams and small thinking. We are called to grande dreams and venti thinking.

Mercy, compassion, integrity, hope, salvation – these are all words of our faith tradition. They are not just words they are the core of the language of faith, a language that transcends our culture. It is a language that gives us hope for every dangerous road we take, courage for every risk we take and strength for every challenge we face.

I was a guest in a meeting this week hosted by Jim Morris, the former director of the United Nations World Food Program. He is passionate about eliminating world hunger. Now we are talking venti thinking. It was there that I first heard that the small country of Iceland is living out

a grande dream. Iceland has offered to support a hungry child in Africa for every elementary child attending school in Iceland. One for one - one child in Iceland is fed and one child in Africa is fed.

The donation will be used in 2007 and 2008. Based on current contributions, it would bring Iceland into WFP's top five donors per capita of population.

There are 45,000 primary school children currently in Iceland. With this donation, 45,000 African children in the poorest parts of the world will be assured nourishment while getting a basic education.

This is venti thinking! It is the language of our faith, mercy, compassion, and hope.

At Annual Conference last June, Bishop Coyner, the Bishop of the Indiana Conferences talked about the dream of the Bishops' Initiative. The Initiative itself consists of grande dreams and venti thinking. The dream is to eradicate the diseases of poverty including malaria, tuberculosis and HIV AIDS. It seems to me that this plan grows out of the understanding that God has lifted us up from the side of the road, brought us healing and hope. Our response is to live in God's grace and allow that grace to fuel our imagination and our creativity. In so doing, we begin to dream big and live out our faith with passion.

Imagine being part of a wave of hope and healing that changes the world in such a way that malaria, tuberculosis and AIDS are no longer a part of our language or our reality.

I am with Starbucks in the sense that I believe life is too short to think small.

A man walked down a dangerous road and was robbed, beaten and left for dead. There were those who walked by and did nothing. There was one, who took the risk, there was one who had the courage, and there was one who felt compelled to offer compassion and assistance.

We are the one whom God has lifted off the side of the road. We are the one that God has healed and blessed. We are the one who has received the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ. We are the one restored. How could we not, how could we not, respond first with gratitude and then with mercy.

We are called to live out our love for our God. No guilt necessary. This is a place of grace. We are the people of God and together we are called to live out God's mercy. How could we do any less? Dream big, Meridian Street. We have some very large living before us. It is all a part of the language of our faith – compassion, mercy, hope, grace, peace, salvation. We have all the language we will ever need. When it comes to Meridian Street – make ours a venti!