

## Black and Blue Lives Matter

*This sermon was preached at Sts. Peter and Paul Lutheran Church in Riverside, Illinois, on July 10, 2016, the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost and directly after the week of shootings in St. Paul, Baton Rouge, and Dallas. The texts were Deuteronomy 30:9-14 and Luke 10:25-37.*

We know summer as a season of the familiar—a trip to Six Flags Great America, a ball game at your favorite park, a bicycle ride on the I & M Canal Path, the Riverside Independence Day Parade and Picnic in Guthrie Park. So, here we are in the middle of summer with one of the most familiar of Jesus' stories, the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Most people know about the Good Samaritan even though they have never been to church or opened a Bible. Our societal life is imbued with the story of the Good Samaritan which transcends religious and non-religious boundaries alike.

Given this summer of terror, mass shootings, gun violence, social distress, political bewilderment, and free-floating fear—a summer strewn with bleeding bodies along the Jericho Road, we may be eager again for that old, familiar story of salvation for the bruised and the battered and those left to die.

Most of us probably think we know this parable so well that it can mean only one thing—that everybody should just try to be like the Good Samaritan. This would make the world a better place, sort of like everyone following the Golden Rule as restated by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12). No country, we say, should be so lawless—so godless—so filled with violence and hatred that people try to solve problems with bullets instead of words. Neither should any of us, we believe, continue to ignore the consequences, "passing by on the other side" (Luke 10:31, 32).

As Dallas Deputy Police Chief Malik Aziz said on Friday, "We have devolved into some separatism and we've taken our corners. Days like yesterday or the day before—they shouldn't happen. But when they do, let's be human beings. Let's be honorable men and women and sit down at a table and say, 'How can we not let this happen again?' and be sincere in our hearts."

When it comes to Scripture, there is a sense that no matter how many times we've heard a passage, we can never really say, "Here we go again. I've heard all this before. Nothing new here. Just try to be like the Samaritan." For one thing, the world has changed since the last time you heard this story. Our nation is drowning in grief. The other thing is that *you* have changed since the last time you heard this story. The text may remain the same, but the context is always changing.

Three individuals walk down the old Jericho Road one day, a road riddled with thieves—call them terrorists—dwelling in caves, lying in wait for the next lone traveler. In Jesus' day, the road was so dangerous that it was known as "The Red Way" or "The Bloody Way."

Two people flee the battered and bruised one who is lying at the side of The Red Way. Only one draws near. The man in the ditch, the one about whom we know nothing, except that he has been robbed, battered, and left to die, must wait for mercy. If there is anyone in the story for us to identify with, it may be this black and blue and bleeding man.

After the other footsteps have faded down The Red Way, the man hears someone else approaching. The day's heat and loss of blood have blurred his vision. Coming toward him, he can barely see, is not some humble, sincere, law-abiding, nice person like you and me. The man soon realizes that he sees—a Samaritan! And now he knows, he's a dead man. Jesus, you surely don't mean a Samaritan!

Two other people have already passed by, people like you and me who surely would be expected to stop and help. These have fled the darkened, red soil. After all, we say, you can't help everybody. Maybe it's his own fault that he landed in the gutter; you know how they drink out here. Anyway, he's not my problem. I've got my hands full with my family and church. You've got to draw the line somewhere. Besides, it's just too dangerous out here on the roads these days. Keep moving!

Then the unexpected happens. This Samaritan comes down "The Red Way," the least expected of the three to stop and help but most expected to inflict further damage. As Jesus tells the story, the Samaritan had what we've been told about Jesus: He had compassion. Remember, he's a human being before he's a Samaritan. His blood flows crimson like that of the man who is about to die. Jesus, you surely don't mean a Samaritan could feel compassion.

Neither race, nor creed, nor politics, nor fear could keep the Samaritan from drawing near to the dying man, risking his own life to save him. Black and blue lives, it seems, matter to him.

We like to think of the Samaritan as a decent sort of human being, just like us. We flatter ourselves! He writes a check to Lutheran World Relief, spends an hour or two a week volunteering at the church, and bakes a loaf of Communion bread once in a while; and, in so doing, makes himself look good to others and, most important, he looks good to himself. But most Judeans would rather die than to owe their lives to a Samaritan. Samaritans who were considered heretics, racially mixed, Roman collaborators, and they were fiercely hated by Judeans. This is worse than extreme nationalism. This is even beyond racism in America. How could it be worse, we wonder. Jesus, you surely don't mean a Samaritan was good enough to be a neighbor to the dying man.

An Israeli Jewish man is left to die in the gutter, and a member of Hamas saves his life. A liberal Democrat is left to die in the gutter, and a far-right Republican saves her life. A white supremacist is left to die in the gutter, and a young African American teenager saves his life. A raving atheist is left to die in the gutter, and a fundamentalist Christian saves his life. Honestly, we'd rather die in a pool of blood than to owe our

lives to the neighborliness, the kindness, the generosity, and the salvation from a Samaritan whom we can't stand.

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Once again, we are offended that, as in so many of Jesus' parables, this is not a story about us at all and what we can do for those who are "less fortunate than we." How condescending. Rather, this is a story about God whose footsteps we didn't expect, and whom we didn't even want. Here is God who sometimes saves us through the very people we can't stand.

In the O.R. of an old M\*A\*S\*H episode, Hawkeye is operating on Sergeant Condon when he sends the nurse Ginger to get a bottle of plasma for him. Ginger is an African American lieutenant. While she has stepped away, Condon whispers to Hawkeye to make sure that he gets "blood of the right color." He doesn't want any of the "darkie stuff."

While Condon is recovering, Hawkeye and Trapper decide to teach him a lesson. "Nothing violent," Trapper says, "just a bit of reverse prejudice." So, while Condon is asleep, the doctors paint his skin with tincture of iodine, giving it a dark cast, leading the Sergeant to believe that, in fact, he has been given "the wrong color blood." Ginger comes around and says, "They got you down as white. Good work, baby... Relax. I won't give you away."

Hawkeye and Trapper tell Condon that Dr. Charles Drew invented the process of separating plasma from blood so that it could be more easily stored. Then they tell him that the Doctor had bled to death in a recent car accident because "the whites only" hospital would not admit him.

In the closing scene, Sergeant Condon admits that he has been given "something to think about," and he salutes the Lieutenant as he departs the 4077.

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Here, in this familiar, beloved story, we hear again about the strange way that God saves the bloody human race—by dying in the gutter because we would not admit him.

When you're bleeding to death, what matters is not whose help you'd choose to have, whose way of practicing religion you like best, what race of people you think are so superior, whose politics you happen to worship—the politics you have made into your religion. Race, religion, politics have nothing to do with who is willing to stop and show you mercy before you die. Yes, Jesus, I guess you do mean a Samaritan is my neighbor—that one who shows us the face of God, often a face very different from our own.

In a column following the shootings in Minnesota, Baton Rouge and Dallas, Charles Blow concludes, "When we all can see clearly that the ultimate goal is harmony and not hate, rectification and not retribution, we have a chance to see our way forward. But we all need to start here and now, by doing this simple thing: Seeing every person

as fully human, deserving every day to make it home to the people he loves.”

“Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe” (Deuteronomy 30:11-14).