

0224 When Stranger Becomes Neighbor (Luke 10:25-37)

Sometime in 2006, there was an amazing thing happened in New York City. A construction worker named Wesley Autrey was standing on a subway platform with his two young daughters, ages four and six, waiting on a train. Suddenly another man on the platform, apparently suffering from a seizure, stumbled and fell off the platform down onto the subway tracks. Just at that moment the headlights of a rapidly approaching train appeared in the subway tunnel. Acting quickly, and with no thought for himself, Wesley Autrey jumped down onto the tracks to rescue the stricken man by dragging him out of the way of the train. But he immediately realized that the train was coming too fast and there wasn't time to pull the man off the tracks. So Wesley pressed the man into the hollowed-out space between the rails and spread his own body over him to protect him as the train passed over the two of them. The train cleared Wesley by mere inches, coming close enough to leave grease marks on his knit cap. When the train came to a halt, Wesley called up to the frightened onlookers on the platform. "There are two little girls up there. Let them know their Daddy is OK."

Immediately, Wesley Autrey became a national hero. People were deeply moved by his selflessness, and they marveled at his bravery. What Wesley had done was a remarkable deed of concern for another person. He had no obvious reason to help this stranger. He didn't know the man. He had his young daughters to think about. What he did was at severe risk to his own life. But a human being was in desperate need, and Wesley saw it and, moved with compassion, did what he could to save him. "The Subway Superman"-that's what the press called him, the "Harlem Hero." But the headline in one newspaper described Wesley Autrey in biblical terms. It read, "Good Samaritan Saves Man on Subway Tracks." He who once was a stranger now became a neighbor to the man.

The reason why Wesley's deed is praised is because that kind of selflessness is very rare. In general we are ruled by the two dominant norms of our culture. First norm is "mind your own business." From very early in life we learn to set our own boundaries and to respect the boundaries of others. It certainly is a good quality. Another norm we commonly have in our culture is "what is there for

me?” Not only in a business relationship but also individual relationship we think of our own interests. What do I gain? And it’s a human nature.

If there is a test of practicing the norms of our culture, Mr. Autrey would probably fail as well as the Good Samaritan in the gospel lesson this morning. They both were not minding their own business. They got involved in another person’s problem. They were not thinking of their own interests. Rather they gave up their own interests. They both displayed deep compassion to the suffering. They took their time to save someone’s life offering what they could offer, saving them from life-threatening situations. Not because they had more time or money than anybody else but they were more willing to give, and give generously what they had.

Minding one’s own business is a good quality, but at times it becomes an excuse of ignorance or indifference. Give and take is an important quality for relationship, and pursuing benefit is normal condition of human. But when it becomes a strict rule for relationship, there’s no room for generosity.

Think about a church that minds its own business and always think of its own interests first. The church loses its purpose. By nature a church is an organization that needs to move beyond “minding its own business.” Managing and sustaining the church itself cannot be the sole purpose of a church. By nature a church is an organization that seeks the interests of others, especially those who cannot pursue their own interests.

Then a question comes to our mind “Are we supposed to give until we run out of everything? What do we gain?”

Our youth and youth from Gale Ferry church had 30 hour famine from Friday to Saturday. Friday night, when people usually go out to eat, they came to church to fast. Friday night when people hang out to relax and do something for themselves, they came to church to learn about the serious issue of world hunger. Their friends must have been puzzled by their decision. They might have been considered as “weird” kids. But in my eyes they are extremely brave kids because they are the ones who cannot just stay minding their own businesses. They cannot just be sitting and calculating “what’s there for me?” They chose to move beyond

the norms of the culture. They refused to remain as strangers of the hungry children in Africa, Asia, Caribbean and our own United States. They may be a stranger now but when the money they raised reach to the children in these countries, they are no longer strangers to the children. They are the neighbors of these children. If they took the test Mr. Autrey and the Samaritan took, they would probably fail the test too. But if there is such thing as good neighbor test, they would definitely pass. It's the same as people who give time and talent for others. When you pray for someone you never met you are no longer a stranger but a neighbor. When you knit a prayer shawl or make a stocking for someone you don't know personally, you are no longer a stranger to the recipients but their good neighbors. When you bring food for Groton Food Locker, you are no longer a stranger to the families that receive the food but their good neighbor. When you pick up the bag for hygiene kit and fill the bag with the items, you are no longer a stranger to the suffering in disaster area but a good neighbor for them. The list goes on. Then why do we do it? What do we gain and what does the church gain?

We do it because we once were also saved by someone who acted as Good Samaritan called Jesus. When we were the people in the ditch, lied helpless and wounded beside the road, needed to be rescued, along came Jesus -despised and rejected-who came to save us, spoke tenderly to us, lifted us into his arms, and took us to the place of healing. As Paul said, while we were still God's enemies, God saw us in the ditch and had compassion, and in Jesus came to save us.

So, the question is not the lawyer's, "What is the definition of 'neighbor'?" The question is who has been neighbor to us. Jesus Christ has been neighbor to us. The crucified one has been neighbor to us. Have you felt his mercy make your own heart merciful? Then in your heart you will know what this means: Go and do likewise.

Who's our neighbor? We asked this question and seriously sought for the answers through our multi-year planning process. With the interviews and demographic data, we found that we have many people in need. We have large number of working poor families struggling with meeting their needs. We have single parent households with children dealing with multiple challenges. We have

senior citizens isolated and don't know how to get access to the community services. We have youth and children who don't have a safe place to hang out with supervision or people to rely on for guidance. We have young college graduates moved into the community to begin their careers apart from their families and support system. We have young Navy families dealing with marriage, finance and parenting issues. We have retired veterans with health and substance abuse problems. We have people without jobs and security for future. We have uninsured. We have homeless. The list goes on. Obviously we won't be able to serve them all and meet all their needs. That's why we will discern whom God wants us to serve. The multi-year planning team will bring the data for you to review and there will be a congregational gathering with a consultant to lead us in the process. It is my hope and prayer that you would participate in the process of discernment. That way together we will identify the neighbors to serve and our ministries of the next 4 years will be much more focused and much more effective.

When a church moves beyond minding its own business, when a church seeks the benefit of others, it no longer is a stranger to the community. Rather it becomes a good neighbor to the community. When a church becomes a good neighbor, it earns people's hearts for Christ. What's more valuable than earning people's hearts for Christ?

As a church we are constantly on our way to Jericho where we find the wounded and the abandoned. And we are called to feel their pain and respond with compassion. We are called to take time to think of their needs and benefit, and give them what we as a community have generously.

This morning again we hear Jesus saying, "go and do likewise." Jesus died to earn the hearts of you and me. And the reason you and I and Christ UMC exist is not to remain as strangers, but to be a good neighbor to the people in our community, so that we can earn their hearts for Christ. May the Spirit of Christ enable us to fulfill our mission!