

“Dangerous Roads and Other Mission Fields” – Stephanie Wing, 7.11.10

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On the way to the next building, a person was slumped on the ground. As the student approached, this person would cough twice and moan weakly, but not make eye contact. Would these students, all people preparing for ministry, stop to help the stranger in need? Would those mentally preparing their sermon on the Good Samaritan be more likely to stop? Do you think they passed the test? Less than half stopped to help. The biggest factor was not the presentation subject, but whether or not they were in a hurry. In fact, several of the students who were rushing to preach sermons on the parable of the Good Samaritan literally stepped over the person slumped in the road in order to get to their destination.

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the sidewalk. We nervously looked at each other, and in this crowd of preachers, I heard mumblings of "the Good Samaritan," but most of us kept walking. A few stopped to ask if he was ok. I watched him to make sure that he responded verbally to the people who asked if he was ok, but then I kept walking. After all, I was a young woman, and I felt vulnerable approaching a grown man who was likely drunk and offering my help. Also, I was a broke Seminary student. I didn't have much money to give. I didn't know what to do - I wasn't from Nashville, so I couldn't point him in a direction to find some help or shelter. Even if I had stopped, I wouldn't have known what to do.

This story of the Good Samaritan rightly makes us squirm in our seats. Many Biblical scholars have pondered reasons the priest and Levite didn't stop. Perhaps they were in a hurry. Maybe they were trying to avoid contact with this body, to stay ritually or practically clean. Maybe they didn't notice him, or figured that they would get down to Jericho and send help from there. Maybe they just didn't know what they could do to help. Maybe all of these factors played a role in their quick decision to keep walking.

But I like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's hypothesis. You see, he had traveled this very road with his wife, and he saw firsthand how dangerous it could be. In the 17 miles between Jericho and Jerusalem, the elevation drops 3600 feet. The road is steep and curvy. You never know what is around the curve on this Jericho road, either. In Jesus' day it was actually called the "Way of Blood" because it was

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Anyone walking this road would have been on high alert. I'm sure the Priest and Levite both saw this man lying on the road, but maybe they thought that the attackers were still close by. Or maybe it was a trap. At any rate, stopping to check on this man was risky business. However, the Samaritan comes walking down this same road. For Jesus' audience, the mention of a "Samaritan" would have immediately heightened the tension of the story. The Samaritans were the other, the enemy. The Samaritan has every reason to keep going, but he stops and helps. He bandages the wounds and takes this man to an inn. He uses his own resources to help this man in need, and promises even more to come. You see, the Samaritan didn't ask, "What will happen to me if I help this man?" Rather, he asked, "What will happen to him if I don't?"

Jesus tells this story to illustrate what loving your neighbor as yourself looks like. To live as the people that God created us to be, and that God calls us to be, means that we will put aside questions of our own comfort and safety in order to fulfill the call to love the other as our self. This is scary. This is uncomfortable. But this is our call. This is our mission. And our mission field is not in Jerusalem or Jericho, but it is on the treacherous road that runs between them.

Very soon, we will pack up the church van and start the trip down to Chattanooga. It will be hot, and the days will be long. We might get tired, or want some time to ourselves. We might get sore from sleeping on the floor. But we are going not because we are worried about what will happen to us, but because we are called to help our neighbor, to show God's love to those who are in need. Through this trip, these youth will be ministering to those in need. But they will also be learning first-hand about our call to help our neighbor, and about what it means to love God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength. We are going to the Jericho highway.

There is another Jericho highway that I want to talk about today. This Jericho highway isn't halfway across the world, and it isn't even on the other side of Tennessee. It is down the street, in our own backyards, and even through this very sanctuary. It is our mission field, the one in which we are called to work day after day. There are many needs and many in need on this Jericho highway, and we must not pass them by. We cannot let our fears keep us from doing the things that God is calling us to do. We often want to play it safe. I see fears that we won't grow as a church. I see fears that we won't have the resources to keep doing what we've been doing the way we've been doing it. I see fears that we won't attract younger people, or fears that if we do, they will want to make changes to our church that we don't want. And so we are waiting - waiting for growth to happen so that we can once again be the church that we want to be - with plenty of

people, young families, and resources to support it all. But we cannot afford to wait. There is a mission field around us, and God calls us to act now.

I've heard many people say something to the equivalent that they have done their part. Perhaps you feel like you are too old, have too little energy, or too little money to do what must be done. Or maybe life is a bit too busy right now - with work, and family needs, and everything in between. I've heard many people say: "We need to get new people, and more young people, who have the time, and energy and resources to do these things (and the money to give)!" That's right, but new members and young people aren't going to magically show up in our church. And even if they did, young couples and families also have very busy lives, are just getting established financially, and may face many pressures that keep them from getting as involved as we might hope. We can't wait for young, energetic families with lots of gifts to share and time to give to come revive our ministry. We are traveling on the Jericho highway, and there are needs around us now!

The primary purpose of the church is to bear witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ, going into the world, out to the highway between Jericho and Jerusalem, and showing God's love to those in need, even at the risk of our life. We cannot hold back from ministry because we lack the resources. The Samaritan did not hold back. He saw a need, and he gave from what he had, without thought to whether or not that would ruin his plans, without concern for what it might cost.

Money is a concern, certainly, but if we do not use our resources for ministry now, what are we saving them for?

We don't want church growth for the sake of being bigger or having more members and more money. We want to grow the church because Jesus calls us to go out and reach out to everyone we know with the good news of the gospel. We want more people and more resources because that will enable us to do more mission, not because that will fill the pews and put more money in the bank.

I have a hunch that if we are more active in mission, that will draw more people to the church, because they experience God's love through our work, and they want to be part of sharing that with more people. But even if we were to drain our savings, drain our special funds, and didn't get a single new member, at least that would have been spent in service to God, in meeting the needs around us in the name of Jesus Christ. If we instead hold on to what we have, continuing with business as usual until we eventually run out of money and people, what kind of witness will that be? We are at a point in our church's life where we must choose - are we going to use what we have to do the work of God, or are we going to hang onto it and wait for more hands to help?

In Baptism, we promise to love these children, and to nurture them in the life of faith, to teach them about God and what it means to be called by God for Christian service. But we need Sunday school teachers. We need volunteers who will help to plan and organize events, meetings, Bible studies, and such. We need

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Certainly the parents of these youth can be an important part of the youth ministry here, but they can't be the only ones. Andy and I can't be the only ones. So who does that leave? You might think you're too old, but what a gift it is to have such a wealth of grandparent-like figures to help love and teach these children! Lee Russell has been teaching the elementary school class regularly for about a year now, and they love it, and are learning so much from her. But there are many different ways to join in this ministry. Mary Weber came to the Lock-In and showed the youth how to make the necklaces she has been selling; Del White made bird-house forms at home that he brought for the youth to work on that evening, too. After we get back from the Mission Trip, we have a day planned to go to the Senior Center, where the youth will play Bingo with some seniors, and then help to deliver Meals on Wheels. I know many of you make trips to McDowell Place to visit Mattie or Elizabeth, or you go visit some other members who have difficulty getting out. Why not take some youth along to play games, to visit, and to get to know others? Maybe you can teach a Bible study. Or maybe you can play card games for a game night, or offer to cook dinner for the youth one night at the church.

Maybe you'll say, "I don't have the energy," or "I don't have the gifts." But there is something that each of us can do. If we can't find the volunteers and resources within the church to nurture our youth, we have a couple of options. We can offer nothing, and see how much longer they will continue to be involved in any church. We can send them to other churches that do have vital youth ministries. Of course many have left on their own for that reason. Or we can use our resources to bring in more help. If we really don't have the volunteers to do some basic Bible study, Sunday school, and youth fellowship, then what? One way or another, nurturing our children in the life of faith, and reaching out to those who have not yet heard that they are beloved children of God, requires putting our time, energy, and money where we say our priorities are.

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This story of the Good Samaritan rightly makes us squirm in our seats. Many Biblical scholars have pondered reasons the priest and Levite didn't stop. Perhaps they were in a hurry. Maybe they were trying to avoid contact with this body, to stay ritually or practically clean. Maybe they didn't notice him, or figured that they would get down to Jericho and send help from there. Maybe they just didn't know what they could do to help. Maybe all of these factors played a role in their quick decision to keep walking.

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Jesus tells this story to illustrate what loving your neighbor as yourself looks like. To live as the people that God created us to be, and that God calls us to be, means that we will put aside questions of our own comfort and safety in order to fulfill the call to love the other as our self. This is scary. This is uncomfortable. But this is our call. This is our mission. And our mission field is not in Jerusalem or Jericho, but it is on the treacherous road that runs between them.

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I have a hunch that if we are more active in mission, that will draw more people to the church, because they experience God's love through our work, and they want to be part of sharing that with more people. But even if we were to drain our savings, drain our special funds, and didn't get a single new member, at least that would have been spent in service to God, in meeting the needs around us in the name of Jesus Christ. If we instead hold on to what we have, continuing with business as usual until we eventually run out of money and people, what kind of witness will that be? We are at a point in our church's life where we must choose - are we going to use what we have to do the work of God, or are we going to hang onto it and wait for more hands to help?

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This story of the Good Samaritan rightly makes us squirm in our seats. Many Biblical scholars have pondered reasons the priest and Levite didn't stop. Perhaps they were in a hurry. Maybe they were trying to avoid contact with this body, to stay ritually or practically clean. Maybe they didn't notice him, or figured that they would get down to Jericho and send help from there. Maybe they just didn't know what they could do to help. Maybe all of these factors played a role in their quick decision to keep walking.

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Anyone walking this road would have been on high alert. I'm sure the Priest and Levite both saw this man lying on the road, but maybe they thought that the attackers were still close by. Or maybe it was a trap. At any rate, stopping to check on this man was risky business. However, the Samaritan comes walking down this same road. For Jesus' audience, the mention of a "Samaritan" would have immediately heightened the tension of the story. The Samaritans were the other, the enemy. The Samaritan has every reason to keep going, but he stops and helps. He bandages the wounds and takes this man to an inn. He uses his own resources to help this man in need, and promises even more to come. You see, the Samaritan didn't ask, "What will happen to me if I help this man?" Rather, he asked, "What will happen to him if I don't?"

Jesus tells this story to illustrate what loving your neighbor as yourself looks like. To live as the people that God created us to be, and that God calls us to be, means that we will put aside questions of our own comfort and safety in order to fulfill the call to love the other as our self. This is scary. This is uncomfortable. But this is our call. This is our mission. And our mission field is not in Jerusalem or Jericho, but it is on the treacherous road that runs between them.

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I have a hunch that if we are more active in mission, that will draw more people to the church, because they experience God's love through our work, and they want to be part of sharing that with more people. But even if we were to drain our savings, drain our special funds, and didn't get a single new member, at least that would have been spent in service to God, in meeting the needs around us in the name of Jesus Christ. If we instead hold on to what we have, continuing with business as usual until we eventually run out of money and people, what kind of witness will that be? We are at a point in our church's life where we must choose - are we going to use what we have to do the work of God, or are we going to hang onto it and wait for more hands to help?

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“Dangerous Roads and Other Mission Fields” – Stephanie Wing, 7.11.10

In 1973, 40 Seminary students at Princeton Seminary were recruited to a task. They had to go to a different building either to record a presentation on possible career choices or a sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan. Some were told they were already a few minutes late; others that they had just enough time to make it over there. A third group was told they had plenty of time. None were told that the real test was literally just outside the door.

On the way to the next building, a person was slumped on the ground. As the student approached, this person would cough twice and moan weakly, but not make eye contact. Would these students, all people preparing for ministry, stop to help the stranger in need? Would those mentally preparing their sermon on the Good Samaritan be more likely to stop? Do you think they passed the test? Less than half stopped to help. The biggest factor was not the presentation subject, but whether or not they were in a hurry. In fact, several of the students who were rushing to preach sermons on the parable of the Good Samaritan literally stepped over the person slumped in the road in order to get to their destination.

I experienced a very similar situation to this a few years ago. I had just finished my second year of Seminary, and I was at a conference in Nashville, with over 2000 preachers from all over the world. One night after a wonderful worship service and sermon, many of us were walking up the hill from the church to our hotels downtown. There was a homeless man lying on his back in the middle of

the sidewalk. We nervously looked at each other, and in this crowd of preachers, I heard mumblings of "the Good Samaritan," but most of us kept walking. A few stopped to ask if he was ok. I watched him to make sure that he responded verbally to the people who asked if he was ok, but then I kept walking. After all, I was a young woman, and I felt vulnerable approaching a grown man who was likely drunk and offering my help. Also, I was a broke Seminary student. I didn't have much money to give. I didn't know what to do - I wasn't from Nashville, so I couldn't point him in a direction to find some help or shelter. Even if I had stopped, I wouldn't have known what to do.

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