

“A Word to Bystanders”
Obadiah 10-15/Luke 10:25-37

Years ago, I heard the tale of a man appearing before the pearly gates. Peter asks “Have you ever done anything of particular merit?” and the new arrival says, “I can think of one thing. Once I came upon a gang of high-testosterone bikers who were threatening a young woman. I directed them to leave her alone, but they wouldn’t listen. So I approached the largest and most heavily tattooed biker. I smacked him on the head, kicked his bike over, ripped out his nose ring and told him, ‘Leave her alone or you’ll have to answer to me.’ Peter was impressed. “When did this happen?” The man answered “A couple of minutes ago.” (Ortberg, John. *If You Want To Walk On Water, You’ve Got To Get Out Of The Boat*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press, 2001, 53)

That tale resurfaced for me as I pondered the Biblical passages before us today. Neither of them, of course, speak of bikers or fictional encounters in heaven, but both tell of bystanders. In one text, no one intervenes and in the other, only one does. Together they offer a word to us.

Our reading from Obadiah checks off another Biblical book that has not heretofore been part of my sermon history. Obadiah is the shortest work in the Old Testament—only 21 verses--and to hear it best, we need to recall an earlier part of Scripture.

In Genesis, when Rebekah, the wife of Isaac and daughter-in-law of Abraham, gives birth to twin sons, the narrative tells of how a struggle between the boys began in-utero and continued into adulthood. Using his own cunning and deception engineered by his mother, the younger son, Jacob, stole the blessing and birthright that belonged to Esau. When the truth came out about that second event, he fled for his life. While the siblings were reconciled years later, they became the namesake for two rival nations—Israel and Edom. Obadiah was a prophet in Israel living centuries later who had witnessed the trauma of Jerusalem being overrun by the Babylonians. Edom was the nation to Israel’s east. His book is addressed to them.

“For the slaughter and violence done to your brother Jacob,” Obadiah says, “shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever. On the day that you stood aside, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you too were like one of them.” For Obadiah, their being a bystander to his nation’s tragedy was bad enough, but the prophet goes on to tell of how Edom gloated over Israel’s fate, looted the land and handed over their distant cousins to the invaders as well. After our text, the prophet will tell them of when all of that evil shall be undone, but as a parting word we heard him say to Edom “As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head.”

Our New Testament reading tells of other onlookers. They are fictional ones who appear as the main characters in Jesus’s Parable of the Good Samaritan. That story is one of the most familiar and beloved ones he ever told. Thus, it was embarrassing for me to look back and learn that this parable has been the basis for only one career sermon and never at DPC. I can well understand if some of you are starting to wonder what I have been preaching on all those years!

Thus, I close that personal sermon gap today, too, in focusing on a story Jesus told after a lawyer asks him “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” In response, Jesus turns the question back and says, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” The man accurately names how he is to love the Lord God and his neighbor. Jesus tells the man he has answered correctly, but his quest is not finished. “And who is my neighbor?” he asks.

It is then that Jesus spins the story of a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho who is attacked by robbers and left for dead. A priest, perhaps having just finished work at the Temple, comes down the same road and sees the victim. Not only does that ordained official fail to stop

and help, but passes by on the other side of the road. The same response occurs when a Levite, a Temple assistant, comes along. Jesus' initial audience would have guessed he would then speak of a Jewish layperson walking down the road, yet instead he continues "But a Samaritan..."

From a Christian perspective, we might conclude the Samaritans were another group within Judaism and be mostly right. After all, they believed in the one true God and revered Moses as a servant who received the Law. They understand the Torah, the first five books of our Old Testament, to be God's Word and observed Passover and other Jewish festivals. Yet they did not accept the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures as authoritative and did not worship at Jerusalem but instead on Mount Gerizim. Those could seem like minor distinctions to us, but those differences and other incidents led to great hostility between the groups. One scholar says of the era "The Samaritans were publicly cursed in the synagogues; and a petition was daily offered up praying God that the Samaritans might not be partakers of eternal life." (Bailey, Kenneth E. *Through Peasant Eyes*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980, p. 48)

Jesus continues. "But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity." The man offers standard medical care for the era, places him on his own animal, and delivers the victim to an innkeeper. He makes a deposit for the man's care and promises to return later and cover any further expenses. "Which of these three," Jesus says to his Jewish questioner "was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" Given the cultural animosity, the man can't bring himself to say the word "Samaritan," but instead answers, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus concludes the lesson by saying, "Go and do likewise."

His story reveals a different bystander response than the ones named by Obadiah. That story is part of our culture as a Good Samaritan today is someone who helps a person in need. There are even so-called Good Samaritan laws on the books, too, that protect individuals who act from civil liability. While the particulars vary from state to state, in general they agree that the one giving assistance cannot be held liable should things go wrong as long as the care is appropriate, offered in good faith, and by one who did not cause the injury. Each of those traits apply to the man who helped the one who had been attacked in Jesus' story, yet his concluding words go beyond issues of liability. "Go and do likewise," he said. We can struggle to do that.

As sometimes, the situation before us is a confusing one and we are unsure of what we should do. In other moments, we know the parties involved all too well and their long history of a complicated relationship and thus resist getting caught in the middle. And there are moments, too, when we are simply in a hurry and don't want to be late for whatever it is we planned next. We all have times of being bystanders and our response in such moments is decidedly mixed.

Nearly 25 years ago, our family traveled to Chicago. The occasion was my graduation from McCormick Theological Seminary and the conferring of its Doctor of Ministry degree. My mother had accompanied us on the trip, too, and we all had great fun exploring the city.

After commencement, I was driving my family back to the hotel. As we pulled off Lake Shore Drive, I saw a man standing outside a car with its flashers going. I slowed down on the ramp and cautiously rolled down my window. "I'm in a real jam, Mister," he said. "I'm out of gas and out of money. Can you give me a dollar to help?" Even the amount of his request tells you how long ago it was! Still, I hesitated and with my family in the car, felt protective of them as well. As I pondered his meager request, the driver behind us blew the horn as I was blocking the exit from that busy thoroughfare. That added pressure cemented my decision as I said to the man "I'm sorry. I can't help." The man threw his hands up in disgust and we drove on.

For the next few seconds, we drove in silence while I second-guessed my response. I certainly had the money. Seated on the back seat was a diploma—my second degree in ministry

no less--and yet I had not helped. My internal beratement soon became public as our then ten-year-old son asked, "Why didn't you give him any money, Dad?" "I'm wondering the same thing," "I would have given him 100 pennies if I'd had my money," Michael continued. "If I had known he was going to need help, I would have brought my wallet." I can still feel the guilt that washed over me in that moment and will confess it's probably the residue of that emotion which leads me to note how the next day he spent those 100 pennies and a few more on a book entitled *Amazing Crocodiles and Other Reptiles*. Still in that moment, it was he who was ready to help and not his preacher father, as I remained a hesitant and unresponsive bystander.

Obadiah was harshly critical of the people of Edom for acting as did I on that day. Jesus didn't add any commentary to the failure of a priest and Levite, allowing the contrast with the Samaritan to speak for itself. Yet, it's clear from both accounts where people of faith are to place themselves when human need arises. We can't respond to every situation that arises nor should we. We often can't anticipate when such a need will occur either and instead the best we can do is continue to prepare as followers of Jesus for when our moment comes.

Philip Hallie was a professor of philosophy at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. As part of his work, he sought to understand how people made ethical decisions and at one point in the late 1970s, learned of a village in southern France called Le Chambon. During World War II when France was occupied by the Nazis that community, unlike many of its neighbors, hid Jews seeking refuge. Hallie was intrigued by their choice and forty years after the fact, went to learn what sort of courageous, ethical persons would risk everything to do such good.

He interviewed people in the village and was struck by their ordinary nature. They weren't heroes in the way culture typically defines it, nor were they exceptionally discerning people. Hallie decided that one factor which united them was their attendance, Sunday after Sunday, at their little church, where they heard the sermons of Pastor Andre Trochme'. "The sermons," Hallie wrote "did not propose a neat blueprint for fighting hatred with love. They were not attempts to tell the world or Le Chambon exactly how to overcome Hitler's evil with love. In those last years of the 1930s, the sermons said work and look hard for ways, for opportunities to make little moves against destructiveness. The sermons did not tell what those moves should be; they said only that an imitator of Christ must somehow make such moves when the occasion arises." (Hallie, Philip. *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*. New York: Harper and Row, 1979, p. 85).

Over time, the people of that church knew what to do. When the Nazis first came to town, they quietly did the right thing. One woman, who faked a heart attack as they searched her home told Hallie "Pastor always taught us that there comes a time in every life when a person is asked to do something for Jesus. When our time came, we knew what to do." (*Leadership*/89, p. 50)

On this day, we pray that the same gift of discernment and courage will come to us when our time is right; that we might be ready when God wants us to be more than a bystander, too.