

Go and Do Likewise
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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"Go and Do Likewise" Pilgrim Church UCC, November 13, 2016, Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time/Stewardship Sermon (Luke 10:25-37)

On this Sunday after the Tuesday, there are a few thoughts to share as your pastor. I won't presume to know how every person gathered here feels in the wake of this presidential election. Some of you may be happy and relieved it's over. Some of you may be sad or angry and relieved it's over. Some of you may just be relieved it's over and would rather not talk about politics anymore. That's the only assumption that I will make—that all of us are relieved that it's over on some level.

Though the truth is that fear continues to be present in our nation. Human beings are afraid of many things. Fear did help fuel this election no matter what side you may find yourself supporting. That is something we should not hide our heads in the sand about because our Christian faith has so much to say about fear.

Remember that time when the disciples and Jesus were out on the Sea of Galilee and they're in the boat and the windstorm kicks up? We talked about this story in Bible Study this week—the waves are crazy and the disciples are terrified that they're about to die. Jesus meanwhile is asleep in the back of the boat on a cushion and wakes up saying to the chaotic waters, "Peace! Be still!" Then he turns to his terrified followers and says, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"[1]

Then there's that time that Jesus gives a long set of instructions in John's Gospel near the end of his life. Scholars call it his Farwell Discourse. Some of Jesus' instructions address the disciples' fears. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."[2] Over and over Jesus addresses the disciples' fears in both his words and deeds.

A few years ago, there was a news report that the number one fear of the American people is actually public speaking. This is true according to the National Institute of Public Health, The Wall Street Journal, Psychology Today and plenty of other sources. The fear of public speaking or glossophobia tops the fear of spiders, snakes, closed in spaces, heights, and flying which are always near the top of the fear list. The fear of public speaking even surpasses the fear of death, which is number two. So we tend to be more afraid of speaking in public than dying. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld remarked, "In other words, at a funeral, the average person would rather be in the casket than giving the eulogy."[3]

I remind you of this because there are plenty of things that make us afraid. We may have had moments of fear this week. But fear can lead us down paths we may not ultimately want to go. Fear can lead us down paths we certainly don't want to stay on for too long. Think of the great wisdom teacher Yoda who proclaimed in Star Wars, "Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering." Yes, we need to be on alert when fear is about. Heights still top the list of what makes me afraid. I never know if my fear of heights is a learned behavior because my dad is afraid of heights or if it's an inherited trait or whatever. Sometimes I push myself to confront this fear, but it's never a pleasant experience for me or for those who love me.

When you walk the path from Jerusalem to Jericho (the journey that the man took in our story from Luke's Gospel when he was robbed, stripped, beaten, and left half dead) you will

inevitably deal with heights. The elevation changes dramatically, so it is a feeling of going down—from 2,500 feet above sea level to 820 feet below sea level to be exact.[4] We walked the path in July through the valley of the shadow of death. Wadi Qelt is where we commemorate both the 23rd Psalm and the Parable of the Good Samaritan. We began the journey at St. George's Monastery in a valley outside of Jerusalem and we ended up in Jericho. The path is rocky but manageable because once you get on the path it's relatively flat. Though on your right side is a sheer drop very far down with no railings or safety nets or anything that will help you not plummet. As we walked, I repeated lines from the 23rd Psalm, combining phrases from various translations, praying: "He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." Unlike the traveler, our group made the journey in one piece. Once we got to Jericho, we drove to the waters of the Jordan River to remember our baptisms. It was an amazing and terrifying journey.

Remember that Jesus taught this story we commemorate in the valley of the shadow of death after he was asked what we must do to inherit eternal life and who exactly is our neighbor? Jesus told this story to remind his followers what his teaching was all about—love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind and love your neighbor as yourself. This is the central teaching of Jesus. This is the central teaching of Christianity. Love God with everything you are and everything you've got. Love your neighbor. Love yourself.[5]

As Christians, we have central values that we must cling to and remember and live out no matter what the future looks like. We must remember that God is good all the time, and all the time God is good. The story of the Good Samaritan was chosen weeks ago because the Stewardship Committee agreed that this would be a great focus text as we contemplate our individual pledges to Pilgrim Church. We have done and can do so much good in the world in this congregation. We can be a witness to the grace of God and the love of Jesus Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit in Lexington and beyond. Through your monetary gifts and offerings, we can truly "go and do likewise" as Jesus taught. When we see someone lost and hurting, we can reach out to them in compassion. Our message of love and inclusion in the United Church of Christ and at Pilgrim Congregational Church United Church of Christ matters even more these days, somehow it does matter more.

This week we perhaps heard what our Senator Elizabeth Warren said on the Rachel Maddow Show. Warren commented that there are definitely places where she could compromise with President-elect Donald Trump. There are ways that she as a Senator can help him and support what he is trying to accomplish in a political system that does indeed need some real change. And then she went on to say, "But on those core issues about treating every single human being in this country with dignity, on that we stand up and we fight back. We do not back down. We do not compromise, not today, not tomorrow, not ever." [6]

In some ways this is what the Parable of the Good Samaritan emphasizes, and this is what we stand for in the United Church of Christ and at Pilgrim Church as a congregation of our denomination. We cannot compromise on treating every single human being in our country with dignity. That is a core value—everyone deserves respect no matter who you are, what you look like, who you love, how or if you worship, or where you come from. We are all God's children worthy of respect. We all long to be truly seen and to have our voices heard. We all have inherent dignity and worth as human beings—Republicans, Democrats, Independents, Libertarians, Green Party members—everyone has inherent dignity and worth here.

So let's not forget when we contemplate this story and let it really sink into our hearts that Samaritans were despised. Jews hated Samaritans and Samaritans hated Jews. The times back then were just as divisive as the times we live in right here and right now. And the Good Samaritan is the hero of Jesus' story. Not the priest who represented the highest leadership

among the Jews. Not the Levite who belonged to minor clergy below the priest but still way above the Samaritan. The Samaritan was a foreigner who wasn't expected to show sympathy to Jews at all, and he was the one moved to pity who got outside his comfort zone to help the person in need. The Samaritan was the hero of Jesus' story about compassion and treating one another as we would want to be treated. The Samaritan treated the injured man with oil that would have served as a salve and wine that would have served as an antiseptic. He gave the innkeeper two denarii to continue caring for the wounded man, the equivalent of probably two months of lodging in an inn two thousand years ago. The Samaritan was good, and showed light and love for someone he should have actually hated because it was socially acceptable to hate him.

Here's the challenge this week: spread light and love into our hurting nation knowing that there is fear present here. Listen to where people are and how they are feeling without condemning them if they happen to feel differently than you do right now. That's not an easy challenge considering how divided we remain. Reach out to someone in need who is lost or hurting on the side of the road, people who are marginalized that others ignore. There are many causes that speak to our hearts, many organizations that do good in this world. Pledge to our church however much you are financially able to pledge because as a faith community we do need money in order to "go and do likewise" as Jesus taught. But don't hesitate to donate to other causes that you are feeling passionate about—how can our money reflect our values as Christians? Most importantly, our challenge in the days ahead remains the perpetual challenge that Jesus taught his followers long ago: love God with everything you are and with everything you've got, love your neighbors, and love yourself. May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] Mark 4:40, NRSV.

[2] John 14:17, NRSV.

[3] Jerry Seinfeld, as quoted by Donna Pinter, Ph.D., "The Number One Fear of the American Public," October 2, 2011, <http://newsitem.com/news/the-number-one-fear-of-the-american-public-1.12...>

[4] Note on Luke 10:29-37 Parable of the Good Samaritan in The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, 4th Edition, 1851.

[5] Luke 10:27-28, NRSV.

[6] Matt Wilstein, "Elizabeth Warren Faces President Trump with Rachel Maddow: No Compromise on Bigotry," November 10, 2016, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/11/10/elizabeth-warren-faces-...>