

THAT'S HOW WE WERE RAISED

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
Grace Church in New York
The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
July 14, 2019

But wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29)

Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan is a recurring drama on the streets of every major city in the world. One time, at least, it also played itself out on the high seas. As darkness fell over the North Atlantic Ocean on April 14, 1912, Captain Stanley Lord of the SS Californian decided to bring his ship to a stop for the night due to heavy ice. Continuing on in the dark was simply too dangerous. Lord instructed his wireless operator, Cyril Evans, to warn other ships. The only response came from the RMS Titanic, perhaps twenty miles away: "Shut up! I am busy." Apparently, the wireless operator aboard the Titanic had a backlog of messages to send, and didn't appreciate the interruption. Thus, having done his duty aboard the Californian, Evans shut off his wireless for the night and went to bed.

As fate ordained, it was only moments later when the Titanic suffered its infamous collision with the iceberg and began to sink. Thus, no one aboard the Californian heard the urgent distress calls that Titanic was sending. Meanwhile, on the bridge of the Californian, the crew had seen a brightly lit ship on the horizon come to a stop. They saw what appeared to be white distress rockets – eight in all – rising above the ship. Through their binoculars they could see that the ship was listing to starboard. What did they do? Nothing – not even wake up Evans to turn on the wireless and listen for any messages. Captain Lord concluded the rockets were probably "company lights" that liners would fire to identify themselves. He was wrong.

Within weeks of the tragedy two official inquiries – one American the other British – condemned Stanley Lord for his inaction. While neither found sufficient cause to file charges, they declared that had the Californian responded promptly to the clear signals of distress, Lord and his crew might have been able to rescue hundreds, if not all of the 1,500 who died.

Most of us need no introduction to the parable of the Good Samaritan, a story Jesus told in response to a series of questions from a lawyer who wanted to justify himself. A certain man was mugged and left for dead along the perilous road between Jerusalem and Jericho. Two other travelers came in sight and saw the clear signs of his distress. What did the priest and the Levite do? Nothing. Both passed by on the other side. *But a Samaritan while traveling came near him,* and the rest is the stuff of legend. The Samaritan – the one whose race and religion were despised by the Jews – stopped and did what was necessary to save the man's life. For Jesus' original listeners, it was a surprise, even shocking ending to the story.

We don't hear the ending as a surprise anymore. Two-thousand years of sermons and Sunday School lessons have extolled the Samaritan and upheld his good deeds. We've named hospitals after him, and generally associated the word "Samaritan" with anyone who shows mercy. And we have vilified the priest and the Levite. Like Stanley Lord, they have been condemned for their inaction. The fact is, Stanley Lord lived until 1962 and he would spend the rest of his life trying to justify himself. In his defense he claimed that the ship he saw on the horizon wasn't big enough to be the Titanic, that the rockets were ambiguous, and that he was being made a scapegoat for the shipping lines, and Captain Smith of the Titanic who ignored the ice warnings. Over the years numerous books, some quite recent, have examined the case of Stanley Lord. Most of them agree with the findings of the inquiries. But still to this day a vocal group of Titanic enthusiasts

rise to the defense of Stanley Lord. They call themselves “Lordites,” and they seek to clear the dishonored captain’s name.

Suppose the priest and the Levite were brought before an official inquiry, and had their own equivalent of Lordites to defend them. Would it be possible to clear their names? How would they explain their indifference? I would expect that they’d remind us of the dangers along the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. It was a notorious hangout for bandits and thieves. It could be that the traveler now in distress had heard the warnings and chosen to ignore them. So why should two honorable people who exercised caution and stayed out of trouble become scapegoats? Furthermore, the injured traveler was as likely to be a decoy as he was a real victim. It was ambiguous.

The defense would press on for the priest and the Levite. These two had priorities in Jerusalem and Jericho. They passed by because loved ones and colleagues also had legitimate, even more important claims on their time and resources. Imagine: they were choosing their own priorities. Finally, they might claim that with a quick assessment they saw no end to the amount of help the injured man would require. Assuming the man was alive at all and wasn’t a decoy, if the priest or Levite stopped to help they would be sucked into a black hole of need, with a gravitational pull from which they could never escape.

What do you think? Have we justified the priest and Levite, and argued them back onto the list of Biblical good guys? I didn’t think so, but it was worth a try. You see, if we can justify them, perhaps we can justify ourselves. But their indifference condemns them, as much as Stanley Lord’s failure to act continues to tarnish his name. The Lordites will always have their work cut out for them, and so do we. You see, Jesus ended the parable by saying, “Go and do likewise.” What did he mean? We assume our charge is to take on the role of the Samaritan. Imagine what we could do if we sprang into action every time a situation of need presented itself. Indeed, the Californian wasn’t the only ship within range of the Titanic’s distress call. Nearly seventy miles away was the RMS Carpathia, with Captain Arthur Rostron in command. When Rostron received the message he immediately ordered his crew to turn the ship around and speed toward the Titanic as fast as they possibly could. It would take them four hours to arrive – ninety minutes after Titanic had disappeared. Even still, Carpathia was able to rescue the 705 survivors who were freezing to death in lifeboats. So don’t be like Stanley Lord. Be like Arthur Rostron. Rostron was a hero. Go and do likewise.

It doesn’t work, does it? Perhaps we show a little mercy here and there: a coin in the cup, a kind word, or a smile. This week I lifted an old man back into his wheelchair on 14th Street, and walked away feeling insufferably pleased with myself. But the sheer number of sinking people on the streets of New York City alone is overwhelming. Just a few nights after helping the man into his wheelchair, I encountered the same fellow rolling recklessly near the top of the subway stairs, aiming his chair at people and wildly cursing at them. So, most of the time, we pass by, sometimes not even on the other side of the road. We fail to be the Good Samaritan. So we figure that the only way left to understand the parable is through the eyes of the priest or the Levite, which brings us full circle back to the endless task of trying to justify ourselves. What do we do with the parable of the Good Samaritan? It seems like an impossible ethical ideal.

Perhaps we need to take another look. A subtle feature of the parable that commentators have often noticed is that the answer Jesus provided gives the lawyer a role in the parable that the man probably assumed he would never have to play. . Listen carefully: the lawyer asked, “And who is *my* neighbor?” After telling the parable, Jesus answered the question with another question: “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor *to the man* who fell among robbers?” Jesus just as well might have asked, “OK, Mr. Lawyer, which one proved to be *your* neighbor?” What Jesus was implying to the lawyer was that the Samaritan proved to be *his* neighbor. Thus, the proper perspective of the parable for the lawyer and for us is neither the priest, nor the Levite, nor

the Samaritan. First we all play the role of the man who fell among thieves. The lawyer is the man in the ditch who needed to be pulled out by the help of another. We are neither the indifferent Stanley Lord nor the heroic Arthur Rostron. We are the freezing lifeboat passengers who needed to be raised up to the decks of Carpathia.

In this light, the parable functions as a summary of the way we understand salvation. Death and resurrection are both within it. It encapsulates in story form the way God has raised us to new life in Christ. It illustrates how we were raised. The man in distress is all of creation, that God raised out of nothingness and into being. The man in distress is Israel who needed to be raised out of slavery in Egypt, rescued at the Red Sea, and brought home from captivity in Babylon. The man in distress is all of humanity that has fallen among death itself, the thief who steals and kills and destroys. We are the people who walk in darkness, but we have seen a great light. And that great light is the Samaritan who sees the affliction of the man in distress, and hears his cry, and comes to rescue him (Exodus 3:7-8). The Samaritan is Jesus, who literally raises up the man from the ditch, pours on oil and wine, gives him back his life, and promises to return.

So the parable bids us to look at the Samaritan through the eyes of the man in distress. It bids us to look at Jesus in the way the injured man looked at the Samaritan, or, in a different time, the way the lifeboat passengers looked at the Carpathia. But it doesn't end there. The parable of the Good Samaritan doesn't allow us to remain staring at Jesus, lost in wonder, love, and praise. Instead, it goes to work on us by challenging those who have been pulled aboard ship to extend the same courtesy to others. *Go and do likewise*, says Jesus. All of us who know ourselves to be raised with Christ now have the opportunity to live a grateful life by being like the Samaritan.

How on earth is it possible to be like him? Recently I read a news story that might inspire, or at least motivate us. It took place in Berlin. A well-dressed elderly man was using an ATM machine in the lobby of a bank when he collapsed to the floor, unable to raise himself. Over the next twenty minutes five people were to enter the lobby to do their banking. The first four stepped over the man who was lying unresponsive between the machines. Finally, a fifth person saw the man and was moved with pity. He tried to rouse the fallen man, and when he couldn't, he called an ambulance and waited for it to arrive.

Jesus said, "Go and do likewise." Here's the motivation – the shove from behind – for doing so. Thanks to security camera footage and identification through the ATM machines, the police were able to locate the four people who stepped over the man in distress, and they arrested three of them. At their hearing the district court judge leveled fines of between \$2,900 to \$4,300, depending on the level of their indifference.

Now for the inspiration – the call from above – to be like the Samaritan. The fifth man in the bank lobby asked to be identified only as Patrick S. In a later interview on the radio the broadcaster asked him why he assisted the man when all the others passed by. Patrick responded, "I didn't care if it was a homeless man or someone else. I call an ambulance when someone is lying on the ground and needs help. That's how I was raised."¹ I took Patrick's concluding phrase to be a deeply theological statement, even though I'm sure he didn't mean it that way. "*That's how I was raised*," is a nice piece of double entendre. Think about it.

Not every situation of need will have your name on it. I leave it to you to discern which ones do and which ones don't. But stay alert and be ready. The cameras are always rolling these days, and no secrets are hidden from Almighty God. When Jesus calls I pray that you and I will be grateful participants in the recurring drama of eternal life, and respond with gladness and with courage. That's how we were raised.

+

¹ "German Court Fines 3 for Failing to Help Ailing Retiree in Bank," by Melissa Eddy. *The New York Times*, September 19, 2017.