

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Colossians 1:1-14, Psalm 82, Luke 10:25-37
July 10, 2016
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Several years ago now when son John was a Peace Corps volunteer in Kenya, Juanita and I visited him for a couple of weeks. While there we travelled extensively around the country. At one point, we were making a long bus trip east to visit an island just off the coast in the Indian Ocean. During one stretch of the bus ride, armed military personnel boarded our bus because this particular stretch of barren dirt road was prone to attacks by bandits.

I was reminded of this when I read the following news article from Kenya dated December 22, 2015. It was sent to me by a parishioner. It occurred shortly after the tragic shooting in San Bernardino, when anti-Muslim sentiments were particularly strong.

CNN reporter Annie Rose Ramos wrote:

Their M.O. is a tried and terrifying one: Launch a raid, single out Christians, and then spray them with bullets. But when Al-Shabaab militants ambushed a bus Monday, things didn't go according to plan. A group of Kenyan Muslims shielded the Christian passengers and told the attackers they were prepared to die together. The Muslim passengers, who were mostly women, told the Muslim militants to kill them all or leave them alone, according to witnesses.

The bus was headed to the city of Mandera near the border with Somalia and Ethiopia. The journey is such a security risk that most of the busses travel with a police escort. In this case, however, the police car broke down and the bus continued on its journey.

When the militants attacked, the gunmen ordered the Muslim passengers to come out of the bus and separate themselves from the Christians.

The Muslim passengers refused. They gave the Christian women their hijabs (or head coverings), and helped others hide behind bags on the bus, a passenger told CNN. "They told them, 'If you want to kill us, then kill us. There are no Christians here,'" he reported.

The gunmen left, but warned they would return.

Joseph Nkaijerry, the Kenyan interior cabinet secretary, later told reporters that the security forces were in hot pursuit of the criminals and commended the actions of the Muslim passengers. "We are all Kenyans, we are not separated by religion," he said. "We are one people as a nation. And this is a very good message from my brothers and sisters from the Muslim community."

In addition to reminding me of our anxious yet uneventful bus ride, isn't this also an excellent example of Muslim good Samaritans going out of their way to save others' lives while putting their own lives at great risk?

This morning's parable from Luke is so familiar that we can easily forget what its deeper message is. A key to understanding it is remembering that Samaritans in Jesus' time and for centuries prior were at odds with the Jews. Neither group liked the other even though they lived in close proximity. There was literally a long history of bad blood between them for over 500 years.

The name "Good Samaritan" is itself an oxymoron because no Jewish person in those days would have said those two words together. For them there was no such thing as a good Samaritan.

Jesus, here, is greatly expanding their understanding of neighbor to include any one in need, not just fellow Jews. Lawyers, priests and Levites of all people should have known to help a wounded fellow traveler, yet it is the Samaritan who goes to extraordinary lengths to provide aid.

You may have heard it said, "Fences make good neighbors." I always thought this meant that a wall of separation would help certain people who don't get along to live side by side without coming to blows. I recently learned that this phrase came from a poem by Robert Frost called "Mending Fences." The poem is actually about neighbors in New England who would walk concurrently on either side of the stone walls separating their properties and repair breaches together in friendship and cooperation.

A Jewish proverb reads, "Love thy neighbor even when he plays the trombone."

As you might imagine, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke often of this passage. He talked about the three different positions represented by the parable in this way. Of the robbers, he said, they lived by the rule, "What is yours is mine. If you don't give it to me, I'll take it from you."

He said the priest and Levite lived by the ways of the world. They were cautious, even fearful. When they saw the man in the ditch, they thought, "What will happen to me if I help?" and then walked on by.

The Samaritan, who proved to be a neighbor, lived by the rule, "What is mine is yours." When he saw the wounded man, he thought, "What will happen to him if I don't help?"

Dr. Karl Menninger, a renowned psychiatrist in the 20th century, would give the following advice to patients who were feeling the onset of a nervous breakdown. "Lock up your house, go across the railroad tracks, find someone in need and do something for them."

Let me conclude this morning with a story told recently by a member of our Bible study class. Joe is not a member of our church. He told us that he was mowing the lawn at his church recently when he noticed a woman approaching him. She had obviously been walking along route 460. In all honesty, Joe said, "My first inclination was to pretend I didn't see her." He thought better of it, however, and stopped his mowing.

The woman told him that she was walking from Illinois to Portsmouth, Virginia, to see her brother. Joe offered to call her brother, but she didn't have his number. She went on to say that all she needed was something to eat and drink and a cool place to sit. Joe got her some cold water, chips and cookies because that is all he could find in the church. He invited her inside but she didn't want to get too cool on a hot day so she just sat in the shade for a short while, then thanked him and walked on.

Joe said the whole incident made him feel great and he added, "You know, I thought afterwards, that woman might have been Jesus!"

This may sound a little corny, but someone has said that joy fills our lives when we put Jesus, first, Others, second, and Yourself, third – JOY.

We can't help everyone and, yes, there are times when we should use caution and common sense. Calling 911 when we see someone in trouble along the road could prove to be very helpful. At other times, we should throw caution to the wind and do what we can.

The greatest danger is that we never feel a stranger's pain and always follow the way of the world by thinking, "What will happen to me if I help?"

After all, we are not all Kenyans, but we are all Americans. We are all human beings, and we are all God's children. And, who knows, maybe, just maybe, the person we help is the Lord himself. AMEN.