

“Bleeding Out on the Jericho Road: Evangelism as Loving Neighbor”
 Luke 10:25-34
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It is my delight to share with you our passage for today. Unfortunately, Rev Cedric Portis was unable to preach today due to a scheduling conflict, but we look forward to hearing him preach from this pulpit again soon.

Luke 10:25-29

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ 26He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ 27He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’ 28And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’

I’m gonna be vulnerable and admit that the word “evangelism” does not instill a lot of motivation in me. Maybe it’s because I’m very much an introvert and the picture it makes in my head feels exhausting. Maybe because it just sounds like a lot of work I have to do alone. Evangelism is that thing we know we have to do, and we’ll get to it (we promise) after the hymns are selected and the bulletins are printed and the visitations are done and the sermon is written and O NO I FORGOT TO ANSWER THAT EMAIL.

For me, the world evangelize has become synonymous with *changing other people to be like me*. It is a word that brings some feelings of failure because it reminds us of how the church isn’t bringing in a lot of new membership. It recalls some dark histories of forced conversions, colonization, and genocide. There are those that believe that the word evangelize cannot be redeemed, while others feel it’s the ABSOLUTE MOST IMPORANT THING. I suspect we are talking about different things, and it is a person pet peeve of mine when people disagree without knowing exactly what we are disagreeing about, especially when we are using different language and actually DO agree.

Sometimes words like *evangelism* have collected so many barnacles of different meanings along the centuries, centuries that haven’t always been kind to God’s

people, that sometimes we need to take a word, dust it off, and ask: how can this word focus our ministry now?

This passage today has Jesus being asked, “*what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” This is an evangelism question. How do we become effectively evangelized? What do we have to do? What do we need to receive? HOW DO I GET THE GOOD STUFF?

Let’s explore how Jesus tackles evangelism. Two things jump out at me right away. The first is that Jesus immediately expands the discussion not just about the soul, but also our minds, our hearts, and our bodies. Any talk about salvation by default must include our whole selves, which includes our physical bodies. This means the pain we experience, the grief that we carry, and the traumas we endure. Jesus’ healing, feeding, and demon-outcasting ministries all tie salvation to not just OUR fully embodied selves, but also to our neighbors.

In other words, for evangelism to be effective, it must speak into the total, fully embodied, lived experience of our neighbors’ needs. Without that, ***how can it possibly be good news?***

It is no mistake that these verses are the lead-in to the parable of the Good Samaritan. That’s the parable about two guys a priest and a Levite who decline to help a person dying on the road, and the one guy who does help. Jesus says do this, not that.

Historically, the Jericho Road that Jesus references was an 18 mile stretch of rocky ground with high cliffs that made the terrain notoriously prone to robbery. It wasn’t uncommon to find people battered and neglected on the side of the road.

A question of evangelism: what does the gospel look like to someone who is hurting? To communities that are perpetually hurting? Evangelism can not be about our OWN needs; we must affirm a person is a worthy human being, acknowledging they are in pain. From there, good news by necessity has to be a coming alongside of them, stopping the bleeding, establishing trust you aren’t going to hurt them. Good news here is working through Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and actually making sure the person is physically safe, culminating in their awareness of belonging.

But the first two travelers don’t do that. I want to stop and name that I am unsettled by interpretations that suggest that their religion prevented them from helping, often we hear a citation of a legalistic reading of the book of Numbers that says someone would become ritualistically unclean if they touched a dead body. Jewish commentators are quick to point out that 1) the Talmud makes an explicit exception in times of need and 2) the verb used here describes going *down* the road, *away* from the temple where any calls for cleanliness would be required. I resist the line of thinking that “ignoring a person in need of help must have been a Jewish thing?”

We are closer to these two travelers than I think we want to admit. As a member of the PCUSA Special Committee on Racism Truth and Reconciliation for the last four years, I've listened to living testimonies of times someone experienced harm right in the wide open (an invalidation of person of color's experience, talking over them, denying to their face that something was racist). The person being asked to stop almost always tries to rationalize their behavior. But where it becomes even more hurtful is when the rest of the room doesn't address it. We've seen it happen frequently when people hurry to show sympathy not for the person hurt, but for the person claiming they were hurt by accusations that they hurt someone else. Is this behavior familiar to anyone? Our report to the General Assembly is full of examples like these, from up and down the PCUSA.

This is us finding ourselves on the Jericho road. A road full of people hurt, while the rest of us continue walking without caring to acknowledge the pain around us, pain we are now complicit in for ignoring: moving down the Jericho road as if we didn't hear what we heard, and see what we saw, and feel what we felt. We miss the opportunities where we could have stopped. Checked in on each other. Asked if we are ok. Said I'm sorry. Thank you for making me aware of that. I'll watch that from now on. Asked what I can do to help. Ask what I might need to do, learn, or surrender, or order to better know how we can help.

In 1967 Charles Hamilton and Stokely Carmichael (now Kwame Ture) spoke of how (quote) "institutional racism has been maintained deliberately... through *indifference, inertia, and lack of courage* on the part of white masses."

Might THAT explain why the priest and the Levite did not stop: *indifference, inertia, and lack of courage*? Is that why WE don't stop to address the ongoing injustices and those prevent the gospel from being embodied in our midst? *Indifference, inertia, and lack of courage*?

I confess my own personal failing of taking too long to understand the depth and impact of racism in the church, SO many things I didn't know and still don't know. I was trained to look away and continue moving on. Any my voice is STILL too timed when it is my turn to speak, my legs too shaky when it is my time to move. The pressure to ignore racism has a lot of inertia. You see while the Jericho road of violence is 18 miles long, the American road of violence from racism is 400 years long, with each generation honing new tactics to not only look away, but to keep the majority culture from looking at all. We cannot live free and thrive on the Jericho Road if we cannot see what we need to see, hear what we need to hear, and say what we need to say. If the rules of the road are limiting our ability to freely name injustice, then we have no good news to share.

So the question is where do we start? How do we get on board? Because, like you, I'm kinda tired.

Shelly Tochluk, a mentor of mine, a white woman author, educator and anti-racism activist from Los Angeles describes the onboarding work of justice as a multi-lane highway with multiple lanes moving at different speeds. For some of us, we need slower on-ramps to get a feel for the road and find ourselves in the work. We'll need to have drivers ed teachers on how to get started. Others of us who have been doing the work of repair for many years need space to move in the faster lanes. We will need to show grace for newer drivers (we can go easy with some of the horn-honking, friends). We need to be prepared for lane changes and accidents, recalculating GPS's and wrong turns. To know when it is our lane to speak, and when it is our lane to listen. And we will need rest stops for those who need a break. And we can show love for one another by giving ourselves blessing to be where we need to be, so long as we are all moving in the same direction.

But we need to fix the road even as we traverse it. We might not be able to fix all of it at once on our own, but we can take responsibility for **the current mile marker where we live, on the Jericho Road**. The mile market that our local church is responsible for. Now, I am still learning the metaphorical potholes and long standing community harms that need to be repaired in the communities that constitute Giddings-Lovejoy. Like everywhere, racism has certain tendencies but some aspects might be more pressing on our specific mile marker than others. I was at the 2018 General Assembly hosted here in St. Louis when you taught the PCUSA of how the cash bail system functions to perpetuate injustice. Earlier we talked about voting rights, and how our voice can become disconnected from our larger community. We are called to notice what parts of the Jericho Road WE live on that needs repair, and we need to be able to articulate how that reparative action embodies good news for all of us.

But as we fix this Jerico road as a kind of construction repair crew, we also need to **think like engineers and address the Jericho Transportation System as a whole**. We need to understand that the entire infrastructure of success and opportunity were all originally constructed at every stretch to give advantage to those of us who were racialized as White. That's not to make anyone feel shame, it's so we can fix it. There is no shame in this work, especially the kind of shame that makes us freeze or lash out. This means being aware that the roads to success for Black Indigenous and People of Color are all in serious need of maintenance, repair, and reconstruction, after decades of neglect. We need to understand how the roads all fit together, poverty, education, incarceration, healthcare, policing, theology, history, and voting rights, all the bridges, onramps and connections reinforce each other. We need to know how other oppressions intersect and conspire with each other to exist: patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, [edited to add: ageism]—if you confront only one of these roads, injustice will simply be detoured to another bypass.

This work is the work of evangelism. Embodying hope and new possibilities, so that we may be transformed.

- It's less about converting others, and more about transforming ourselves.
- This is evangelism, less about fixing individuals, and more about repairing communities.
- It's less about drawing community members into our clean bubble, and more about bursting our bubbles and getting into the ditches where our neighbors are.
- It's less about waiting for heaven after we die, and more about joining Jesus in bringing heaven to earth right now.
- It's less about what we do FOR each other, and more about who we are, TO each other.

Evangelism is the experience of delivering good news. *Words are optional.*

I see a presbytery that has the tools to fix the Jericho Road. From Lindbergh Avenue to Delmar Boulevard, from 270 to 44, from 55 to the Great River Road. In fact, you've been at it faithfully for generations. The witness of evangelism as "good-newsing" is the kind that reshapes our communities. We have the resources. We have good ideas. We have the experience to share vast depths of expertise, and the diversity of perspectives to help us understand the different worlds we inhabit. You are one of the boldest presbyteries in the PCUSA around prophetic proclamation—I know because every time I interface with my colleagues in ministry from around the country, people know the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy as a voice for justice. You don't hesitate to travel tough roads because you know the work is that important.

I also see a presbytery that is tired. That has been beat up a lot over the last two years. Grief is being felt very vividly in our midst even today. Funerals raw in memory and being planned even as we speak. Many of us feel we are in a ditch right now on the Jericho road. And even being asked to do one more thing is just too much to bear.

And so I want you to know that the good news Jesus talks about is for you. God sees you. God hears you. Jesus calling out our community to be the travelers who stop on the Jericho road to tend to your wounds.

This is love.

This is evangelism.

May we “do evangelism” by EMBODYING love.

*And they will know we are Christians by our love, by our love,
They will know we are Christians by our love.*

Amen.

(Note: I am indebted to Rev. Traci Blackmon for first instilling in me the core insight of this text the metaphor of the Jericho Road as a local space that needs to be fixed. Shared with gratitude)