

SERMON TITLE: "A Summer Road Trip: A Highway to Service"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 10:25-37
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: August 16, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

On August 1, in *The Standard Examiner*, there was an article about the road construction project on 20th Street between Washington and Harrison. The reporter wrote, "For most residents living along the heavily torn up section of 20th Street . . . , the work there could presumably be described as an unpleasant but necessary inconvenience. But for 2-year-old Lucas Colledge, it might as well be Christmas."

The reporter then went on to explain that the road construction crew had noticed that the little boy was truly fascinated with their work. Every day Lucas was outside his house watching them with great interest. So the workers figured that they should do something to help the two-year old develop his potential road construction skills. The Geneva Rock employees then pooled their money and "bought the child a variety of construction toys—a tractor, a loader, blocks, hard hat, vest and more."¹ In this weird time of coronavirus, when so much is beyond our control, that kind act of service was something the road workers could do to help Lucas, his family, and themselves all feel better.

Our theme this month is "A Summer Road Trip." Since COVID-19 has limited where we can go, we're venturing forth on some biblical roads. On August 2, the prophet Isaiah described for us the sights along "A Highway to Hope." On August 9, the story of Naomi and Ruth provided us a road map for "A Highway to Home." With the Good Samaritan story as our guide today, I invite you to travel along on "A Highway to Service."

1—A HIGHWAY TO SERVICE BEGINS WITH A PROBLEM

In this scripture from Luke 10, we see that a highway to service begins with a problem. Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan takes place on the highway "going down from Jerusalem to Jericho." A

Bible commentary indicates that this “notoriously dangerous” road “descended nearly 3,300 feet in 17 miles [and] . . . ran through narrow passes at points.” Not unlike the old road between Powder Mountain and North Ogden, this highway to service held many practical risks for any traveler any time. But the dangers of this road were increased even more because “the terrain offered easy hiding for the bandits who terrorized travelers.”² And, of course, Jesus’ parable begins with just such an attack of robbery that left the victim “half dead.”

The problem at the beginning of this highway to service is kind of like a British television program that my husband Steve and I discovered a few days ago. In the very first episode, a mother, her two small children, and their dog were traveling along a busy freeway in England. They briefly pulled their car off the road onto what the English call a “layby.” That stop to purchase a bouquet of flowers from a roadside vendor was the beginning of a terrible problem in which the mother was kidnapped, and the children and their dog were abandoned to a journey fraught with even more peril.

Or maybe the problem at the beginning of a highway to service is like the vehicle accident experienced last Sunday by the couple from our church. As they were traveling in their pickup and pulling their brand new trailer in eastern Oregon, all of a sudden a wind burst flipped them over, totaling their rig and sending the wife on an ambulance ride to one, two, and then three hospitals.

Of course, a highway to service can be metaphorical, so the problem doesn’t literally have to happen on a road. Any trouble, trauma, concern, or need along life’s journey can be the starting place for a highway to service.

2—A HIGHWAY TO SERVICE REQUIRES NOTICING THE NEED

The next phase of our trip along a highway to service requires noticing the need. While we all certainly try our best to avoid problems of our own, in his Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus also calls us to open our eyes and ears to the problems and needs of those others who are our neighbors and fellow travelers.

A recent article in *The Christian Century* magazine emphasized that, while the coronavirus pandemic is a huge tragedy, even in this economic and social slow down, there are some opportunities for us. The author writes, “Slowing down augments our capacity to notice . . . to be curious, to abide, to become attentive to, to demonstrate compassion toward.” Continuing on, the author suggests, “To attend to the precarious, to the vulnerable, carries with it a spiritual depth that resonates deeply with the Christian tradition. What good,” he asks, “would the Israelites’ cries have been had the Divine not heard, not noticed? What if Elijah had not listened for that voice that met him at the entrance of the cave?” And then, the author provides these punch lines: “Could the good Samaritan have been good without first noticing a man in anguish alongside the road? . . . To notice is the first step toward embodying compassion, toward enacting justice. One cannot care for what one has yet to notice.”³

Unlike the priest and the Levite who went down the road ahead of him, the Samaritan did not pass by on the other side of the road to avoid seeing the man’s pain. The Samaritan was willing to allow his eyes to see and his ears to hear his neighbor’s suffering.

I’ll admit to you that noticing deeply isn’t easy. While we may get caught up in “doomscrolling” bad news during this pandemic, there’s only so much bad news any of us can take in without it adversely affecting our mental health. So it’s natural for us to preserve our sanity by simplifying and limiting our intake of problems. One way to do that is to avoid situations, places, and types of people who are likely to have needs—and especially if their problems aren’t easily solved. In our avoidance, sometimes we pass over to the other side of the road or to the far side of the city or to the other school district. Or, sometimes, we make laws and policies that limit those people-with-problems to certain places, to keep them away from us. You know that acronym NIMBY, Not In My Back Yard. We put up resistance to *those* people coming near us because we want to avoid noticing their problems. Truly seeing the suffering of our neighbors causes us pain. But the highway to service requires us to notice their need.

3—A HIGHWAY TO SERVICE CALLS US TO ACT WITH COMPASSION

The highway to service in Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan doesn't stop with just having a problem and noticing the need, however. The true neighbor also accepts the call to act with compassion. Moved with pity by what he noticed, the Samaritan bandaged the man's wounds, carried him on his animal, and took him to an inn, where he paid the innkeeper to continue caring for the man.

If we wanted to, we could rationalize this story to death. We could imagine that the priest and the Levite had to stay ritually clean, because they had other people who were depending on them to hurry up and arrive somewhere to do something important. We can also tell ourselves that this Samaritan must have been extraordinarily gifted with the ability to help. After all, he had—at the ready—resources of bandages, a beast of burden, and the money to pay an innkeeper. We could presume that he had superhero levels of patience and time along with the physical strength to lift the man up. We can defend ourselves by saying, "We would help too, if we had all that." But would we, really?

In our Friday study this week, we were reading in the Gospel of Mark about Jesus telling the rich man to sell his possessions and give to the poor. That got us talking about the \$1200 economic stimulus payments most of us received a few months ago. Someone said, "We retirees weren't at a loss of income. We didn't need that money like the people who lost their jobs did." If that's the case, what did you do with that windfall of money? Buy something new for yourself? Stash it away in your savings? If you still have it, now might be a great time to share it with someone in need.

Yesterday's *Standard-Examiner* newspaper indicated that, even before COVID-19 struck, the Weber-Morgan health district had counted nearly 2400 homeless people. With the \$600/week additional unemployment compensation having just come to an end, there's great fear that even more people will become homeless in the next months. Last Sunday's Moment for Mission speaker, Dani Bell, told us that the Lantern House homeless shelter currently has 250 people staying there. Fifty to sixty of

those are kids, for whom they need to provide a way to get an education during this crazy time. The Lantern House is our Mission Emphasis this month and could certainly use your extra donations.

If you want to donate more broadly, the United Methodist Women sent out a letter asking all of us to help them support five mission programs here in Ogden: The Lantern House, the Ogden Rescue Mission, the YCC domestic violence shelter, the Joyce Hansen Hall Food Bank, and the Family Counseling Center. If you'd like to help in that way, make your checks to FUMC, and note "UMW Charities."

If you don't have money to give, another way to act with compassion is to help harvest our church's garden vegetables early on Tuesday mornings. Each week, those fresh vegetables are delivered to the Lantern House kitchen to help provide nutritious meals for the homeless and hungry.

A number of you brought used items for yesterday's parking lot sale to raise money for medical expenses for the little baby we've been praying for. Thank you for doing that.

There are a lot of things we can do on our own and together to alleviate human suffering and pain. A highway to service calls us to act with compassion.

CONCLUSION

On Thursday morning, when I arrived here at the church, there was a homeless couple camping in a tent in the corner of the church yard by the offices and sanctuary. Fortunately, Paul, Tim, and Kerry were here to help me. We tried to be kind and compassionate. We invited the couple inside to use the restroom and to get a little bit to eat. We offered to take them to get more food, if they wanted it.

Since our church yard wasn't an ideal place for them to stay, I think we did the right thing to help them move somewhere else. But I have to say I did and still do feel conflicted. I hope we didn't just move them to the other side of the road so we wouldn't have to notice their suffering and so we wouldn't have to spend more time helping them than we did. We Christians will probably never feel like we've noticed other people's needs enough or acted in compassion enough. But Jesus calls us to give it a try, at least—because that's what it means to travel a highway to service.

¹ Mitch Shaw, "Ongoing 20th construction a treat for a young resident," p. A1.

² R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, (Abingdon Press, Nashville: 1995), p. 229.

³ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/opinion/our-pandemic-slowdown-has-been-good-planet>