

In October of 2015 *Reader's Digest* carried an article that featured 24 stories about what the editor called ***“the touching kindness of strangers.”*** One story was titled *“The Man at the Market.”* It was contributed by Leslie Wagner from Arkansas. Ms. Wagner told of being in a supermarket one time. When she checked out, the clerk tallied up her groceries. Much to Ms. Wagner's surprise she discovered that her bill was \$12 over what she had in her purse. With embarrassment she began to remove items from the bags in her cart. Quite to her surprise another shopper saw her predicament and handed her a \$20 bill. Embarrassed, Wagner said to the person making this generous offer, ***“Please don't put yourself out.”*** ***“Let me tell you a story,”*** said this kind person. ***“My mother is in the hospital with cancer. I visit her every day and bring her flowers. I went this morning, and she got mad at me for spending my money on more flowers. She demanded that I do something else with that money. So, here, please accept this. It is my mother's flowers.”***

And so, gratefully, she did accept the gift.

What a thoughtful act. We are always touched when we see one person do something kind for someone else. It gives both the giver and the receiver a good feeling. In fact, it's a wonder more of us don't perform acts of kindness for one another just so we can experience the good feeling it gives us.

Of course, one of the world's best-known acts of kindness is found in our Gospel lesson for TODAY. It's a familiar story to us all. It was a story that Jesus told about a man who was going from Jerusalem down to Jericho when he fell among thieves who robbed him, stripped him, beat him and left him for dead.

Bible scholar William Barclay notes that this kind of thing frequently happened on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The road was notoriously dangerous for travelers. Jerusalem is set on a hill which is 2,300 feet above sea level. The Dead Sea, which is located near Jericho, is 1,300 feet **below** sea level. Being situated near the Dead Sea makes Jericho about the lowest city on earth. The road between Jerusalem and Jericho descended 3,600 feet in little more than 20 miles. It was a road of sharp turns and narrow passageways and provided several excellent lurking places for thieves and bandits.

Fortunately, the road was well traveled, so it wasn't long until a priest happened by. Unfortunately, the priest glimpsed at the broken and bleeding body lying there by the side of the road and hurried by on the other side. Out of kindness, let's assume he thought the man was dead. Priests were forbidden due to the law to touch a dead body. **Dead bodies were ceremonially unclean.**

Likewise, a Levite, when he saw the man, passed by on the other side. Levites were under the same prohibition concerning dead bodies as were priests.

But there was a “certain Samaritan”—that is all we know about him—a certain Samaritan who, coming upon the man, ***had compassion on him.*** He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them, and he placed the beaten man on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day when he needed to be moving on, this Samaritan went to the innkeeper, took money out of his own pocket and gave it to the innkeeper saying, ***“Take care of this man, and if this isn't enough I will give you more when I return.”***

The story of the Good Samaritan is one of the most famous stories in all of literature. Jesus told this story in response to a lawyer's question, ***“And who is my neighbor?”*** **That is a question that still haunts us today, doesn't it?**

Are illegal immigrants our neighbor? Are people who are starving in remote sections of our earth our neighbors? It's interesting. Luke tells us that the lawyer asking this question did so BECAUSE... ***“HE WANTED to justify himself.”*** We ask the same thing—**also wanting to justify ourselves.**

As followers of Jesus we know that the obvious answer to this question is, ***“Anybody who needs your help is your neighbor.”*** But that's a lot of people!

Jeremy Taylor, a 17th Century bishop, used to counsel aspiring ministers ***to “Speak kindly to everyone you meet for everyone has a problem.”*** Everyone does have a problem of some kind. **I guess that makes everyone our neighbor.**

I doubt that there is anyone here this morning who does not feel a twinge of guilt when reading this story. ***We recall the hitch-hiker we left standing by the side of the road.*** We know the danger of picking up strangers, and yet it still bothers us to pass someone by.

There was that derelict who approached us on the street asking for a handout. “He would probably have spent it on whisky,” we say to ourselves as we pass him by, but deep in our hearts we wonder what Jesus would have done.

“Lord, what is my responsibility to these people?” we quietly pray. ***“There is so much need everywhere I turn. How far do you mean for me to go?”***

While you ponder that question, let’s confront the fact that in our society today people are less and less likely to play the role of the Good Samaritan.

On the front page of a newspaper there was a picture that was very sad. ***A man who was a Vietnam Veteran, and had been a paramedic in Vietnam, was leaning on the door of an automobile that was stalled beside a busy expressway in some northeast region of our country.*** The story underneath explained the circumstances of why he was bent over that car and was weeping. On the way to work that morning the woman who had been driving that car had a heart attack and had fallen outside the car there by the busy expressway, and this man happened along and stopped to render help. Being a paramedic, he gave her emergency treatment and for some 20 or 30 minutes, he was able to keep her alive. But after 25 or 30 minutes she died in spite of all the emergency treatment he was able to give. **But the reason for his crying was this.** He said that during that period of 20 or 30 minutes, he beckoned everyone who passed along the roadside to stop and summon help for them, to get an ambulance to come to the rescue of a dying woman. But he said, ***“No one seemed to care.” And no one stopped.***

It’s a revealing story of the kind of society we are becoming. Obviously, we have our reasons, just as the priest and the Levite had their reasons. **Still this story makes us uncomfortable.**

THERE ARE (2) LEVELS AT WHICH WE MAY RESPOND TO THE STORY OF THE “GOOD SAMARITAN. **The first is at the level of simple civility or common courtesy.**

I once read that just as Hawaiians have no word for “weather” because the climate is so good, Eskimos have no word for “thank you” because in a world that is so stark, helping one’s neighbor is seen as a duty.

You would think that being civil to one another is the least we can do. Every major religion or philosophy acknowledges that. **You most certainly do not have to be a Christian to extend common courtesy or simple kindness to a stranger in need.**

Dr. Daniel Liroy tells about a pro football player named John Frank who spent (5) years with the San Francisco 49ers. Frank had played in two Super Bowl games. He was 27 years old and in his prime as an athlete when something happened that caused him to reassess his priorities. In one of the 49ers games an opposing player appeared to have suffered a serious injury. John Frank rushed to his side. At one time Frank had dreamed of becoming a physician but he gave in to the fame, glory and big bucks of being a pro football player. Still, he had a physician’s heart. And so, it was only natural when he saw this player injured he would pause to try and help him. The result was that Frank was chewed out by his coach for ***“giving aid and compassion to the enemy.”***

Suddenly life as an NFL player was not quite as important to Frank. At that moment he decided to hang up his cleats. He decided to go full-time to medical school. And today John Frank is a practicing physician. “Walking away from pro football seemed silly to everyone, but Frank says he is happier now in serving the hurting. [He says] he has no regrets about giving up fame and fortune in the pro ranks.” We admire a man like John Frank, but it’s important for us to recognize that the kindness of the Good Samaritan is being shown every day all over the world. **Courtesy, compassion and kindness are the least of what ought to be expected of a human being.**

However, the teachings of Jesus instruct us to go beyond what the ordinary person is apt to do. YES, THAT NEXT LEVEL OF BEING A “GOOD SAMARITAN” IS BEING WILLING TO “GO THE EXTRA MILE” ... TO CARE JUST A LITTLE BIT MORE.

In her book *Profiles in Character*, former Congresswoman Barbara Cubin of Wyoming tells how her character was shaped by the moral influence of her parents. Barbara's parents divorced when she was young. A few years later, Barbara's mother remarried. Her new stepfather worked hard to support the family. One particular story demonstrates the kind of person he was. Barbara's birth father, while on a visit to Wyoming, was beaten and robbed. Evidently, he was not in good condition and he was alone. At the hospital, a paramedic searched her birth father's clothes, found his ex-wife's phone number in one of his pockets and called the house. Barbara's stepfather answered the phone. When he learned what had happened, her stepfather dropped what he was doing, went immediately to the hospital and paid her birth father's hospital bill. Then he took her birth father to a local motel. The stepfather paid the proprietor of the motel for the father's room and meals until he had recovered enough to go home.

I don't know how it is in most second marriages, but I am not surprised that her step-father's kind deed to her birth father made such a deep impression on Ms. Cubin. **YES, HE WAS WILLING TO "GO THE EXTRA MILE."**

There are many Good Samaritans of every race and creed all over the world. Those who follow Jesus, however, are expected to do even more—GO THE EXTRA MILE. We are expected to give love and compassion to those whom other people pass by. But there's one more important thing we need to see in this story.

Those of us who have known the grace of Jesus Christ at work in our lives know that it was once we who lay in a ditch broken and bleeding. It was the ultimate Good Samaritan, who is God, who ministered to our needs. Now we long to do for others what God has done for us. THAT IS WHAT "GRACE" IS ALL ABOUT. THAT IS WHAT THE "GOSPEL" IS ABOUT.

SO, NOW, TODAY, EACH OF US NEEDS TO ASK OURSELVES, HOW ARE WE DOING WITH THE CARE OF OUR NEIGHBOR? As we look over the fence, across the street, as we see a bro/sis in another car or on the side of the road, OR even now in need at the 4th of July Parade...are we willing to help those in NEED? This past week there was another shooting in the Chicago area. 6 were killed and dozens were wounded. Among them was a mother/father who were killed with a young son. Yes, he survived...WHY? Because Good Samaritans who I am sure were frightened for their own life, saw the little boy under his dying father, but they stopped to rescue him. *"what wondrous love is this..."*

I do not know of any great servant of humanity, whether it be Dr. Albert Schweitzer, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mother Teresa or whomever it might be, who was not driven, first of all by *"a wondrous love for God."* Loving people is not enough. People can be ornery—sometimes even hostile—even those who need help the most. If you are motivated only by a love for people you will soon grow weary in well-doing. *But if you are motivated by your love for God, you can move mountains.*

Archibald Rutledge once told about visiting a church service where the singing was contagious, the prayers were splendid, the minister, most impressive. As the congregation was leaving following the benediction, however, there was a woman unkempt and weeping, sitting by the church yard fence. Only one of the worshippers paid any attention to her, one of the ladies went over and knelt down beside the desperate woman and sought to dry her tears and comfort her. **Rutledge concluded that only one person in that entire congregation really knew how to worship God. It was the one who did something to help.**

When Christ gets hold of us, we reach out to other people NOT just because we are nice people. *We do it because once upon a time we were lying in a ditch and a stranger reached out to us.* Now that stranger has invaded our lives and it is he, not we, who reaches out to our neighbor through us—using our hands, our material resources, our valuable time.

An unknown author paints this revealing picture: On the street I saw a small girl, cold and shivering in a thin dress, with little hope of a decent meal. I became angry and said to God: "Why did you permit this? Why don't you do something about it?" For a while God said nothing. That night God replied, quite suddenly: *"I certainly did do something about it... I made YOU."* **And that's why God made us—to do something about it. Can He depend on you?**