

SERMON
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson
Luke 10:25-37
The Good Samaritan

The lawyer said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

500 MILES

- 1 - If you miss the train I'm on, you will know that I am gone
 You can hear the whistle blow a hundred miles
 A hundred miles, a hundred miles
 A hundred miles, a hundred miles
 You can hear the whistle blow a hundred miles
- 2 - Lord, I'm one, Lord, I'm two, Lord, I'm three, Lord, I'm four
 Lord, I'm five hundred miles from my home
 Five hundred miles, five hundred miles
 Five hundred miles, five hundred miles
 Lord, I'm five hundred miles from my home
- 3 - Not a shirt on my back, not a penny to my name
 Lord, I can't go a-home this a-way
 This a-away, this a-way, this a-way, this a-way
 Lord, I can't go a-home this a-way
- 4 - If you miss the train I'm on, you will know that I am gone
 A hundred miles, a hundred miles
 A hundred miles, a hundred miles
 You can hear the whistle blow a hundred miles

You might say, the Road to Jericho from Jerusalem, is a *long and winding road* (Paul McCartney). But as I read today's familiar story about the Good Samaritan, *500 Miles* came to mind. (Peter, Paul & Mary sang it in the early 60's) The Road to Jericho is a long and winding, steep and dangerous. And though the distance between Jericho and Jerusalem is just 25 miles—walking it feels more like 500 miles. In the time of Jesus it was known as the "Way of Blood" because the journey was known for bloodshed and thievery. Jericho itself, is an oasis in the desert. It is believed to be one of the oldest inhabited cities of the world—inhabited as much as 10,000 years ago. And it is a city with the oldest known protective wall in the world. Jericho is 846 feet below sea level in an oasis in Wadi Qelt in the Jordan Valley, making it the lowest city in the world.

It has lots of history. In early times, it was the first Caananite city that the armies of Joshua defeated. Legend has it that the walls of Jericho fell after Joshua's Israelite army marched around

the city and blew their trumpets. “Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, and the walls came tumbling down.”

In Jesus’ day, the road to Jericho was known for its danger and difficulty. Today, Jericho it is a Palestinian City in the West Bank and is an administrative seat and governed by the Palestinian National Authority. I haven’t been to Israel/Palestine in a number of years, but when I was there —my first visit— I was 26 years old. We were not far from Jericho—when I was frightened out of my skin. I was walking alone when some young Israeli soldiers-in-training thought it would be amusing to toss a few mock grenades in my direction. I don’t remember much except they seemed to appear out of nowhere and I was terrified by their guns and not knowing who they were—and why they were messing with me. I scrambled to avoid the explosions, twisting my ankles. That night I had to see a doctor to wrap my swollen legs. “That’s how *Sabra* flirt,” I was told. *Sabra* is an endearing nickname used for young Israelis—It’s a prickly desert fruit with a thick skin that conceals a sweet, softer interior. Sweet or not, they may have had benign intentions but my experience was terrifying. I saw them a few hours later on the shoreline of the Dead Sea. They laughed and waved. Their intent and mine were obviously quite different. Same day. Same encounter. Completely different experiences and outcome. Because we were operating out of very different realities.

There’s a helpful word used by playwrights and screenwriters and novelists—storytellers. The word is: “through-line.” A “through-line” is the connecting theme that ties together all the elements of a story. It’s like a strong cord or rope onto which the writer attaches all the elements that are part of the idea of the story. All the pieces of a story need to connect. When we recognize the through-line, we see what has driven the plot and characters —all along. It makes the story feel whole. It makes the story all tie together. There can be an overall *through-line*—and different characters can have different through-lines within the story. Each character needs to be drawn in a way that is consistent with his or her through-line. What is important to that character? What do they need? What are they trying to accomplish? When you figure it out, what they do and say, will begin to make sense. Even when they do terrible things, if you know their “through-line” you can understand why they did it. And when characters have dramatically different “through-

lines” that’s when dramatic conflicts happen. *Through-lines* are the interior purpose, values, and goals that drive a character— a person—to actions.

The Sabra were out for a good time. Probably their day-off from military training. A mock grenade was a way of calling attention to themselves—of saying “hello.” They meant no harm. Just making a joke, really. I perceived only danger and was concerned for safety. It was life and death for me. To me, there was nothing funny or inviting, about a grenade.

The parable today, the story of The Good Samaritan is made up of lots of *through-lines*. Luke is a genius! He begins by giving us Jesus’ through-line! What matters most to Jesus? What is the motivating, organizing principle, you might call it, of everything he says and does?

*"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."*

And [Jesus] said to the lawyer,
"You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

And the story that follows is a collection of conflicting through-lines.

*"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of
robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead."*

The first character: A Priest.

*Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he
passed by on the other side.*

Of course he did. Priests were required to be ritually clean in order to perform their duties. He crossed the road as he thought he must.

Likewise a Levite...passed by on the other side.

Of course he did. A member of the tribe of Levi—as an assistant to the priests, he, too, crossed the road as he thought he must in order to perform his duties.

But the Samaritan had no such requirements. The Samaritan, a member of a marginalized group within Judaism, was rejected by the privileged Jerusalem hierarchy. He had no such restrictions.

The Samaritan was moved with pity. He bandaged his wounds.

He brought him to an inn. He took care of him.

He paid the innkeeper to take care of him.

And more.

Who was the neighbor?

"The one who showed him mercy."

"Go and do likewise."

Now we know the heart and mind of Jesus. His through-line. Are we to be pure and holy like the first two travelers in the story? Does our pedigree and privilege matter most? What through-line gives our lives meaning and purpose? What through-line guides our decisions and commitments?

“Loving God and loving one’s neighbor” results in acts of mercy and loving-kindness. When we give up the categories of WE and THEY and embrace our common humanity—the needs of us all—we will be less concerned about ourselves and more concerned about the injustices and hurts that affect us all. When we give up the separations—the categories of WE and THEY—then acts of loving-kindness become acts of loving our neighbors as ourselves. When we give up judging others—the categories of WE and THEY—then advocacy for those who suffer and are mistreated becomes what we do because we love as we have been loved.

Loving God with all our hearts, and with our souls, with our strength, and with our minds; and loving our neighbor as ourselves is not controversial—though I suppose it does depend on

what your through-line is. Mercy and loving kindness is not liberal or conservative. It is faithful. It is what gives our lives meaning and purpose. On the road to Jericho there is no longer WE and THEY and THEM and US. We're all on this journey together.

From the meditations of Howard Thurman

*We walk the ways of life together...How precious it is to lean upon another,
to have a staggered sense of the everlasting arms felt in communion with
[others].*

*Lord, I'm one, Lord, I'm two, Lord, I'm three, Lord, I'm four.
Lord, I'm five hundred miles from my home
Not a shirt on my back, not a penny to my name
Lord, I can't go a-home this a-way
You can hear the whistle blow a hundred miles*

Secular or sacred, this folk song is a soulful lament—a through-line—an essential insight into our shared human experience and need of God and each other.

AMEN.