

## ***Dangerous Neighbors***

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

*Preached at the Lower Merion Baptist Church*

*Sunday, July 15, 2007; Bryn Mawr, PA*

Luke 10:25-37

*"...do this, and you will live."*

### *Movement 1 – A Safe and Familiar Story*

This is a safe story. It is a familiar story. It is a story we grow up with, a story that is known by many and loved by many. It is a safe and familiar story. This is one of the parables of Jesus that is most often taught. It is a parable that can make sense and be taught to children. It is a parable that can be easily remembered, it is a safe and comfortable story.

When we are traveling our way through the words and the stories of the Bible, we can find ourselves stopping at these safe, known and comfortable stories. They are like rest stops as we journey through the complexities and confusing aspects of the scriptures. We may travel through the two creation stories, the beginning of humanity and stop to rest at the familiar story of Abraham and Isaac. We may journey through the begetting that are listed in Genesis and then find a known and comfortable place in the story of the birth of Moses. We may stumble through the laws of Leviticus, the stories of rulers who rise and fall in Kings and Chronicles, but then find ourselves sighing with relief as we read the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, and say without thinking that the Lord is indeed our shepherd. We may struggle through the writings and the stories of the prophets, but find a sense of comfort at Micah 6:8 when we hear that we are called to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our Lord."

Even in the New Testament, we can find ourselves stumbling through passages of difficulty and danger. When Jesus says that he has come to tear apart the family we may begin to feel a little lost. When the disciples talk about sitting at the right hand of Jesus our minds may begin to wander as we wonder about heaven. Yet then we come to a story like the story of the Good Samaritan. We come to a familiar passage like this one, and it feels like we are driving home. It is like we have been driving for a distance through the wilderness, but then we turn onto a street that we recognize. We pass some houses that we have known growing up, and we begin to feel comfortable, we begin to feel as if we are home. That is the comfort and the safety of this story. When we begin to hear the words, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho," we settle down into our pews, comfortable that we know what is going to happen. It is a story that is safe.

We like the safe and known story because we are comfortable in something that we know. Think of the carpenter who has spent the last five years of his life building shelves. It was what he would do. Yet in the last week he was asked to make some chairs, and it was a challenge for him to enter into this new terrain. He would be working on an intricate piece of wood, trying to carve and cut and measure and coax the wood. He is in new ground, he is in difficult ground, and is struggling. Then someone asks him to build a basic shelf, and he enjoys the simplicity and the ease of the task. It is something that he has done in the past, and something that he can do, something that he knows well, like going home.

Or maybe you have gone to see a Paul Simon concert. Maybe he does a number of new songs, and they sound nice, but you aren't used to them. But when he does something from his "Simon and Garfunkle" years, it is nice and familiar and safe. You can sing along. You know the words.

This is the story of the Good Samaritan. A story that we know inside and out; that we live and we love.

The safety of the story of the Good Samaritan has saturated much of our culture. There are groups of people who travel around looking to help out others in need. They call themselves “Good Samaritans,” or claim to be a part of the “Good Sam’ Club.” In one *Seinfeld* episode titled, “The Good Samaritan,” Jerry is trying to be a “good Samaritan” by giving letting someone pull in front of him, by trying to confront a “hit and run” individual, and then paying for the person’s damage. This is the conception of the “Good Samaritan,” is someone who is nice and does good deeds for others. It seems like an easy thing to do and follow. It seems like a safe thing to ask others to do. It is comfortable and familiar. So maybe you can predict where this sermon is going. Maybe you already know the final point of this sermon, “love your neighbor.” And it feels good to rest in something comfortable, something known and something familiar and safe.

Even as I was working on this sermon I was remembering what Billy Graham once said, “Comfort and prosperity have never enriched the world as much as adversity has.” Yet maybe we want to take a break from adversity. Maybe we should take advantage of the safe and familiar story that is such a part of our cultural and Christian lexicon. We are comfortable at home, and why would we want any adversity at home. Maybe we should take a break and relax in this safe, safe story.

### *Movement 2 – A Safe and Familiar Faith*

The story can reflect our safe and comfortable faith. This is a faith that we can rest in, that we can practice in a routine way. This is a faith that does not throw us any surprises, or give us any trouble. It is a “go to Sunday, be nice during the week and go back to church on Sunday,” kind of faith. This is a faith where it is easy to evoke the name of Jesus, and not expect any kind of change or challenge to our life. This is a faith that fits easily into our life and conforms well to our expectations.

When I was working on this sermon in a coffee shop I overheard someone who had this kind of faith. This person was talking about her church and her child that was going to be baptized. She was complaining that the church was not fitting her schedule and her desires for Baptism. The church was requiring classes, the church was requiring that it be on a specific day, and she was not having an easy time with that. I remember hearing her say, “I go to church, and I believe in God, but I don’t like having to change my life so much so that my child can be baptized.” A safe faith does not require that one change one’s life for God. A safe faith does not take risks but always stays within a comfort zone. A safe faith stays at home.

In the beginning of the book *The Hobbit*, Bilbo Baggins was in essence escorted on a quest with a bunch of dwarves and one wizard. He was not thrilled about going into a new and dangerous terrain, and was complaining about the trails of the hike, the lack of well cooked food and the difficulties of being outdoors all of the time. He would dream of his home, “the shire,” he would dream of the safety that he felt, the comfort he felt and he longed to be home.

That is what our faith can be like, a comfortable home and a safe home. It can be like staying at a bed and breakfast; we are pampered and made to feel at ease.

We pray the same prayers because we know them and they make us feel safe. We worship the same way week after week because it is a way of worshipping that we know, are comfortable with and makes us feel safe. We sit in the same pews, we maintain the same relationship with God that we have always known and are comfortable with. This is a safe faith

of familiarity. It is like the beginning of the movie/musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. What is it that people rest on, what is it that people rely upon for comfort and surety but “tradition?” With tradition they know what to expect, what will happen and they feel comfortable and safe.

And maybe we like to be in this place with our faith. Maybe we like to take it safe and easy. Maybe we like to ride our bike with the training wheels still on, we like to stay in the same neighborhood all of our life. Maybe, in this increasingly chaotic world it is good to have something to go to that will offer us comfort and ease. Maybe it would be nice to have our faith be like the Good Samaritan story, something that we can look to with a sense of familiarity and comfort. So we look for a church that best fits our lifestyle. We look for a style of preaching that comforts us and calms us. Rick Warren, in his book *the Purpose Driven Church*, claims that churches should meet the felt needs of society; make them comfortable and safe. So this sermon may be a nice break from sermons of conviction and commitment. This sermon may be a nice break from prophetic preaching and righteous rhetoric. It might be nice to comfortably settle in and hear and respond to a safe and familiar story with a safe and familiar faith.

### *Movement 3 – A Dangerous Approach*

Yet a comfortable faith becomes an insipid faith. A complacent faith becomes a cultural faith that loses its strength, its depth and will not grow. A comfortable faith that conforms to our lifestyle is a faith that only listens selectively to the Lord. The church that maintains comfort moves from being a church of the gospel to a church of culture because it works hard to conform to culture. It begins to push a cultural Christianity that conforms to the soccer schedules, the civic schedules and the cultural schedules of the world. In a world where there is suffering, how can we be comfortable? In a world where there is meaningless violence, how can we be complacent? In a world where there are people who do not know the Lord, how can we stay in the safety of our home? People are dying spiritually and physically, and if we stay in our homes, if we close the doors and the shutters, then we are partly responsible for their deaths. Let’s not just be comfortable with our faith. Let’s not just rest in our safety, because we are missing a big piece of the gospel, we are not fully in a relationship with the Lord; we are not completely listening to Jesus.

We need to examine more and more closely our faith. One of the things I like about the show *CSI* (in whatever town you want) is the idea that if you are missing something or if something doesn’t make sense, then go back to the evidence. In episode after episode the characters seem to be missing a vital piece of evidence that would incriminate someone. Instead of saying that it isn’t there, instead of taking a simple and easy way out, they go back to the evidence and take a closer look. They go over what they had assumed to be done one more time, they question a little more, and find something that they had missed. This is what I think we need to do with our own faith.

Maybe you know about Shane Clairborne, who is with *The Simple Way* in Philadelphia. Shane is an Eastern graduate who grew up with a comfortable faith. He grew up with a safe faith. Yet then he started to read the Bible more closely. He started to look more closely at the teachings of the gospel. He took off the training wheels; he ventured out of his neighborhood and began to engage a deeper, a more dangerous, challenging and a transforming faith. Out of his experience he began a monastic movement in the Kensington area to transform the neighborhoods and try to be as present as possible in the name of Jesus Christ. He looked a little more closely, he read the scriptures with a more critical eye, he was more critical, and Shane deepened his faith.

I believe we are called to do this as well. I believe we are called to step out of our safety zone and engage all of the scripture, engage all of the revelation of Jesus Christ, and engage our faith in all of its complexities. We are called to read and study the creation stories, learn them and apply them. We are called to read and study the stories of the tower of Babel, the stories of Joseph and Jacob and of a wandering people. We are called to engage the stories of Moses with the Israelites in the wilderness, to hear their complaining, and the response of the Lord. Take a chance and read the mad words of the prophets. Take a chance and hear the scathing words that cut down the establishment, that condemn those who hold power and that call the people to return to the Lord. Hear the words of anguish as well as joy in the Psalms. Hear these scriptures and then ask the dangerous question, where am I in these passages? Am I murmuring with the Israelites? Am I jealous of Joseph along with his brothers? Am I one of the people in power neglecting the millions of AIDS orphans in Africa? Am I in anguish or am I causing anguish? We are called to look at our own faith again and again with a fine tooth comb. Where could we grow, where do we need to be challenged?

Take a dangerous step with your faith and engage the dangerous scriptures, allowing them to engage, challenge and interpret your faith. The scholar Vincent Wimbush talks about a hermeneutical approach to scripture as one world engaging the other world (“Reading Texts through Worlds, Worlds through Texts,” in *Black and Catholic: the Challenge and Gift of Black Folk*, ed. by Jamie Phelps). Let the world of the Bible engage and shape your own word in a risky and dangerous way.

Look more closely at your faith. Ask yourself if you are truly following Jesus in the fullest way. Are you taking the easy path or the dangerous path in your faith? Robert Frost wrote about this approach to life when he wrote about:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

I took the other, as just as far,  
And having perhaps the better claim  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that, the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I marked the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

*(from the Road Not Taken)*

This dangerous, this deeper faith is a faith that is not often taken. We could take the road that has been walked on before us. It is a road paved with comfort, a road paved with ease, and it is not the road that Christ calls us to walk. The road upon which Christ calls us to walk is the path that is not often taken. It is the way which Christ leads. Let us take this road in our faith.

*Movement 4 – Loving the Lord*

Let's start with this familiar, safe passage of the Good Samaritan. Let's remember that this passage is not so much about loving our neighbor (although that is a big part of the passage), but is about the two great commandments. This is what sets off the passage, a lawyer asking Jesus, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" and Jesus returning the question with a question about the law. The lawyer deftly replies the two great commandments, "You shall love the Lord you God with all your heart, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Isn't it interesting that the lawyer does not question the first commandment? Isn't it interesting that the lawyer does not ask something like, "and what is love?" Maybe he knew that such a question would push to far. Maybe he thought it would be a dangerous question, or on the surface a stupid question, and so he quickly moved to the more ambiguous issue of the neighbor. It was safer and easier to move past love of the Lord to identity of the neighbor. And it is common for us to do the same. It is common for us to move past the first commandment to the second, since the parable focus on such a question. Yet let us not be too hasty. Let us not be too quick to rush to the story and take a moment and consider what it may mean to love the Lord. For the love of the neighbor seems to be predicated on the love of the Lord. One could argue that our love of the neighbor comes out of a love of the Lord, so let us not be too hasty.

Maybe we have been safe with our love of the Lord. Maybe we have kept it tempered and on a leash. Our love for God is on a shelf, is a partial love given out in rations so that we are not shaken up to much. We love the Lord, and we love NASCAR. We love the Lord and we love pizza. We love the Lord and we love Eagles Football. God has a place along with all of the other vying and competing parts of our lives. We only have so much love, so we must be careful how we use and distribute our love.

But this passage in Luke, the passage from Deuteronomy, and the passage that is mentioned in Romans calls us to take everything off of the shelf that is competing for our love and only leave the Lord. We are called to love the Lord with all of our heart, with all of our essence with all of our strength and with all of our mind. We are called to put God first, above everything else, and not even have anything second. If we love God with all of our strength, then there can't be a second, there is nothing left. If we love God with all of our heart, then how can we also love anything else? We are called to have the focus of a world-class athlete, to have a single dedicated purpose and focus only on God.

Think of Daniel in Babylon. He was threatened, his life was at risk if he would not worship the statue made by Nebinkenezzer. If he valued his life he would submit and bow down. Yet Daniel loved the Lord with all of his heart, mind, strength and essence. Daniel would not let the fear of death take over his love of the Lord and continued to worship the Lord even though it led to his arrest and being thrown into the den of Lions. Think of some of the early Baptists like Obadiah Holmes. They were trying to follow God, to love God in a way that encouraged a believer's baptism and religious freedom. They had a place to worship in Rhode Island and could stay there safe and secure. But people like Obadiah Holmes loved the Lord more than he loved

his own safety, and went to Boston again and again even though he was arrested and whipped for his preaching and his teaching.

I want to warn you, that if you move from a safe and comfortable love of the Lord to a full love, a love that responds to scripture your life will be changed. I want to warn you that this will be dangerous, this will be difficult, but it will be full and blessed. The theologian Louis Pedraja says that to love God is an action. That one cannot just have a love for God, but one must do a love for God. So all of your life is a doing of your love of God, and this can be challenging and dangerous. Loving the Lord is something that moves you and changes you. The love of God can change us all.

### *Movement 5 – Dangerous Neighbors*

This brings us to the second part of the commandment because this is the doing of the love of God. This brings us to the place that we all know and remember. But this also brings us to one of the more dangerous parts of the Bible. Maybe it was not an accident that this passage has been reduced to a sweet and accepted passage that children laugh and sing about. Maybe it was not an accident that this passage has been manipulated into something that people can easily accept and listen to. But look at this more closely. Let the world of the scriptures enter into your world and realize how dangerous the story can be.

A man is walking from Jerusalem to Jericho. A man is walking down a dangerous road of twists and turns. A man is putting his own life in his hands as he takes this journey, and as one would expect, the man is jumped, robbed, beaten and left for dead. A priest was going by, probably in a hurry, and saw the man on the side of the road. It could be a trap. It could be someone who was looking for compassion so that others in hiding could rob him. Is it worth the risk to stop and lose one's life?

A Levite was walking down the road and saw the man. Maybe some of the same thoughts went through his head. Maybe he thought about Jewish laws and that the man looked unclean. Is it worth taking the chance with his life, his community and his understanding of God to help out the man?

A Samaritan, the scourge of the Jews, hated, despised and distrusted stopped and took care of the man. The very one who everyone expected to continue on his way stopped and took care of the dying man on the side of the road. Who knows what was going on in his head? Martin Luther King, Jr. suggests that the priest and the Levite asked what might happen to them if they stopped, maybe the Samaritan asked, "what might happen to the man if I don't stop?" Maybe the Samaritan looked at the man and realized that this was God's child, beloved by the Lord. Maybe the Samaritan looked at the man and could not depersonalize the beaten and bloody pulp because he loved the Lord. A love of God cannot rest when one of God's children is suffering, and so he reached out and acted.

But he is where the story got dangerous. Not only did the Samaritan reach across the boundaries, but now his life would be forever changed. How could he now look a Jew in the eye and feel hatred? How could he now look the ones he had sworn to hate and continue his hatred? How could this Jew who was only helped by the Samaritan look at another Samaritan in the eyes with anger and malice? They have both been changed in a way that would be dangerous in their world. Their world was one of boundaries of sides and of a clear sense of hatred and distrust. Through the love of the neighbor those boundaries have been broken, and they will not easily be accepted.

The Baptist preacher in the south, Will Campbell loved his neighbors as found that love to be dangerous. During the civil rights movement he worked closely with the black community in the south. He advocated for them and he was their pastor. As a white man in the south he was taking a risk by walking across the culturally created boundaries. Yet he read this passage and other passages from the Bible and realized that he could not rest with just ministering to the Black community. Campbell realized that he also had to minister to the White community, and so, while speaking truth to the power, he ministered to members of the Klan. He prayed with them, he loved them, while speaking truth to them. Because of his radical ministry he was rejected by both the black community and the white community. This is a dangerous love of the neighbor.

This is not a safe passage because it is calling us to reach out, to care for and to love the very ones that society calls us to ignore. This is a dangerous passage because we will be marked; we will be marred and stigmatized. This is a dangerous passage because it calls us to put our very lives on the line for someone else.

Yet if we love the Lord with all that we have, and if we realize that God also loves the neighbor, than how can we do anything else? We love our neighbor as we love ourselves; a child of God blessed and beloved by God.

#### *Movement 6 – Dangerous Faith*

This passage calls us to a dangerous love. This passage calls us to a love that puts God as the only focus in our life and that will find friction with the rest of the world. This passage calls us to have dangerous neighbors. It calls us to have neighbors who change our lives, and for us to change the lives of our neighbors. We may be persecuted by others. We may be questioned by others as we strive to follow the example and the message of Christ. This passage calls us to a dangerous faith. It calls us to a faith that will not settle with compliancy or comfort. It is a passage that will not let us rest with the cultural acceptance of the Good Samaritan, but will look at the challenging aspect of the Good Samaritan.

Where will you find yourself standing? Will you stay with a faith of comfort? Will you stay with a faith of ease? Where will you find yourself standing? Will you stay home in your known and acceptable faith, or will you follow the faith of Jesus Christ? The safe, the easy faith says that the Good Samaritan is about being nice to everyone you come in contact with. The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to change and be changed in a dangerous and life-altering way by our love for God and our love for the neighbor. Let the faith of Jesus change you, shape you and bring you to a faith that is unsettling but is blessed. Ask the Lord for that love, for that focused love so that you can deepen your faith. Ask the Lord for that faith so that you can love your neighbor, no matter who your neighbor is, no matter what your neighbor looks like, no matter what your neighbor believes. Ask the Lord for the faith that you can love your neighbor in such a way that you are challenged and changed and so that you can challenge and change your neighbor. Do this and you will not just be an admirer of Christ, but you will be a follower of Christ. Do this and you will not be someone who stays in the safety of a cultural Christianity, but you will be in the world as a Christian who stays true to the gospel. Say to the Lord, I want to be a Christian. Ask the Lord to be a Christian, always growing, always changing, always looking to love the neighbor and to love the Lord.

AMEN