



DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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"How Does the Story End?"
Third Sunday after Epiphany
Elected Officials Sunday
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Luke 10:25-37

Recently, a convenience store was robbed. The entire robbery was captured on the store's security cameras. A stick up man entered the store just after midnight. He pointed a gun at the woman behind the counter, a mother who had just put her two children to bed for the night a couple of hours ago. She complied, handing him everything.

Then he calmly looked at the cash, looked back, and shot her to death. Random cruelty, pointless death, on a night in North Carolina.

And when I saw it; it turned away. I flipped the remote control and, within a few minutes, I no could no longer see the calm killing in Carolina.

"He went to him and bandaged his wounds,...he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him."

It's a story about violence. That's how the story begins, with a random act of violence. We don't know the man's name who was beaten, robbed, stripped, left half dead in the ditch. He is simply one more anonymous victim, heaped on the sidelines of the Evening News. It is a story you have heard before, a story to which you and I are all too comfortably adjusted.

Careful listeners to the story will note that Jesus doesn't explicitly say that the robbers actually robbed the man, though that is a safe assumption. Jesus says that they "stripped" him. And if any of you have ever been the victim of some act of violence, you could testify -- is exactly how it feels. You feel stripped, violated, your dignity peeled away, exposed. Stripped. And we are told that the man lies stripped, in the ditch, "half dead." His life story has not yet ended, though it is at least half ended. Last year two thousand New Yorkers ended their stories at the hands of fellow New Yorkers. Over three hundred New York cab drivers took their last ride last year, victims of random violence. So we are justified in thinking that this is probably the end of the road, the last ride for the man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves.

But this is a parable and, in Jesus' parables, the unexpected usually always happens. It is a narrative set up, a literary device meant to make us ask, "What now? What will become of the poor, bleeding man in the ditch?"

"Now by chance a priest was going down that road...." Jesus says that this man was headed down the same road to Jericho "by chance." He wasn't there as an act of God or something, he was just there "by chance." Randomly walking down the road. The man lying in the ditch has had all of his options stripped from him. Nothing he can do of his own accord can enable him to keep his story going. He lies there helpless, half-dead. Though

he doesn't know it, the one coming down the road bears the burden of responsibility for whether or not the man in the ditch shall live or die.

"And when he saw him,...." Yes, he sees him. There is that split second, perhaps, when he secretly wishes that he had not seen the bloody sight in the ditch. But no, he saw. And...."he passed on the other side." And all potentialities, possibilities end as he not only passes by the pitiful sight in the ditch, he "passes by on the other side." His journey is continued, "on the other side." Please don't read into the story (though you probably already are) reasons why the man passed by on the other side. Jesus is silent on any possible reasons. As a priest, perhaps he feared ritual defilement with a corpse. Perhaps it was fear. Those who beat the man in the ditch might be lying in wait to beat him as well. But note that Jesus says nothing of such reasons. A bloody body in a ditch is a revolting sight. Have you ever come upon someone after a bloody accident? It's ugly.

Jesus says nothing of his reasons for avoidance. Doesn't need to. Without much creativity, we listeners supply our own list of reasons, for they are our reasons, reasons each of us has used on similar occasions. Is there anyone here who has not averted the eyes, not passed by on the other side for a host of perfectly understandable, good reasons?

And by such reasons, whatever the reason, evil continues its way in the story, persists in insisting on having the last word in the man's life. Because the last real action in the story, was that of the robbers who beat, and who stripped, and who left the man half dead. Evil rules. A man passes by on the other side, having distanced himself from the wounded victim, and now the man in the ditch is surely a bit more than half dead, having lost much blood by this time of the day, at this point in the story.

Another person comes down the road and...he passes by on the other side. He also bears the possibility of intervention, the potential to make a difference in the way this story is moving. Yet, when he sees the wounded man, he too passes by on the other side.

And wouldn't we? What difference can one person make? We do have to live, don't we? The fear of contamination by death, the fear that the evil forces which have nearly snuffed out the life of this fellow traveler down the road to Jericho might snuff out our lives as well. I have seen it in my own congregation. Someone is fired from his job; people avoid him, as if he had some kind of communicable disease. They don't want to catch what he has got. This is a powerful, irrational fear, all the more powerful because of its irrationality. We must survive, don't we? And isn't that the whole point of our story, survival?

"But a third man, a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was...." We've heard this story twice before, what's the point of repeating it again? Let the story end, the age old story of the triumph of evil, the power of violence.

Surprise. "And when he saw him, he went to him."

Just as Jesus did not speculate about the motives of the two people who passed by on the other side, so now he refuses to speculate on why this third traveler saw him, went to him, bound up his wounds. He touches the victim, cleans and binds his wounds, sets him on his own beast and takes care of him.

The man who was brutally beaten cannot continue his journey. He was powerless to continue his story if it had not been for this Samaritan who chose to intersect his life journey with that of the wounded man. By his act, the man once stripped of his dignity, his possessions, his future, is able to live. "And the next day...."

The Samaritan takes money out of his pocket, the equivalent of two days' wages, a large amount of money indeed, and gives it to the innkeeper, saying, "Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back." The Samaritan stops his own journey when he sees the need. He risks, detours, extravagantly responds to the needs of the man bleeding in the ditch, becomes the voice of the victim, the man in the ditch who never utters a word.

I've always found it curious that God is nowhere to be found in this story. No one quotes the Bible. The story begins in violence, a man left in the ditch, beaten black and blue, with the stench of death hovering, vulture-like ready to pounce, ready to end the story. We wish Jesus had offered some reason for the violence, pin it upon poverty, class resentment, or poor education among the bandits, or injustice. We always grope for a reason for violence.

One of Margaret Atwood's characters in Surfacing says that she reads detective novels because she finds them "cold comfort but comfort" because in detective novels violence is given reasons "death is logical, there's always a motive" (p. 170).

But Jesus does not attribute motive to the robbers' brutality. This is violence its worst. Random, senseless, inexplicable. Jesus doesn't say that the robbers might have been victims of poverty, thus "explaining" their robbery. He doesn't say they were abused as children, thus "explaining" their adult violence. In its cold blooded randomness, evil horribly calls our very existence into question. So we grope for reasons, explanations, somebody, some social force to pin it on. Finding none, we hurry by on the other side.

And at the beginning, with the man lying in the ditch, passed by by the "there but for the grace of God go I" crowd, we expect the end of the story.

Americans, living in the most violent society in the modern world, have learned stoically to accept such violence. But the teller of the tale is Jesus, not Marcus Aurelius. So surprise, a third man came down the road and the story continued, and we heard tell the possibility that death might not be the end of the story, that evil just might not have the final word.

I wish you would believe that story.

Two men came down the road and assumed that violence, death had the last word, could not be modified through their activity. By avoiding the man in the ditch, refusing to stop, they conferred absolute power upon the present darkness, made the status quo, almighty violence and death, omnipotent. What can anybody do?

Has death, violence made it impossible for us to live the story? What can anybody do?

The third man is not much of a philosopher, psychologist, sociologist. He sees, he stops, he goes, he binds, he cares, he gives. He refuses to bow to the power which has so disempowered the beaten man. Evil is real, bloody, but it is, by this story of Jesus, denied final victory.

We aren't told whether or not the man recovered. Perhaps that is irrelevant to the story. Nothing in the story leads us to believe that the third man who stopped, who cared, who gave was motivated by some allegiance to a successful ending. If the poor man did not recover, would that in any way detract from the power, the intrusive power of the third man to change the course of the story, to wrench possibility out of the hands of destruction and

death? If the poor man never regained health, we still would end the story in wonderment at the decisive, effusive action of the third man.

Death is not logical. Victims of random violence may recover, may go on down the road after their recovery, though they travel now with scars. As a woman who was raped told me, "You get up, you stand up, you go on, but you still cry sometimes."

There is no Pollyanna reassurance here that everything will turn out alright in the end. Evil is real, but it is not the ultimate reality. So I ask you a question, a question which I believe is raised by the story: What is real? Does destruction have the last word in our state? Or does life? Walking down many roads in life, each of us must make a decision about that question. Who shall name North Carolina for us? What is real? Not to decide, to look the other way, to pass over to the other side, is to decide.

The third man stops and cares as a free, untethered expression of life, of a clinch-fisted unwillingness to let death have the last word in the story. In his care he overcomes the natural, normal human reaction to step to the other side, to relent to the evil that presses in upon the story.

We can read the story otherwise. It's meaning is thick. We can read it as illustration that the man in the ditch is the helpless victim of meaningless violence and therefore life is meaningless, therefore the wise person does everything possible to turn aside from the meaningless, to stay firmly on the other side of suffering with our burglar alarms, our insurance, our advanced degrees, our dispassionate philosophical explanations for why bad things happen to good people. Two people who come down the road, the majority of average Americans, and pass by.

It is the minority, one in three, who is free, rich, gifted, overflowingly confident in his own ability to make a difference in the way the story is going.

In The Brothers Karamazov, Dmitry has been arrested, wrongly, for the murder of his father, and has been exposed to an exhausting, humiliating ordeal of being cross-examined by officials who hold him, and everything he believes in, in contempt. After interrogation, Dmitry falls asleep and while he is sleeping some unknown person slips a pillow under his head. Dmitry fastens upon this gratuitous kindness from an anonymous stranger as determinative for understanding his situation. While sleeping, he dreams about the predicament of others, of starving children, and his heart yearns for their suffering to end.

Why did Dmitry select the simple act of someone putting a pillow under his head to focus upon rather than his being an unjust victim as pivotal for the formation of stance toward reality?

In 1955, something like 5,000 American children died of polio. We got together, organized, pooled our resources, and defeated polio. In 1994, something like 5,000 died from guns in America. Why no national outrage or action?

See? It makes all the difference how you read reality, how you write yourself into the story of what's going on in the world...

(I am heavily indebted for the interpretation and the approach of this sermon to James Breech's stunning interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan which is found in pp. 158-183 of his book, The Silence of Jesus, The Authentic Voice of the Historical Man, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1987.)