

LOVE TAKES A DETOUR
Faith in Action #1

LUKE 10:25-37

Welcome to the first Sunday of our Faith in Action all church emphasis! This morning I want you to think with me about detours. In everyday life and living they're usually a pain in the neck. But, spiritually speaking, God often puts a detour along your life's journey to move you into a divine opportunity: an opportunity to know Him better, an opportunity to serve someone in Jesus' love, an opportunity to grow in your faith. Now, let's be honest this morning! What do you feel when you see this sign along the highway?

We're going to look at a person in the Bible who took a detour on his road of life. You've no doubt heard of him. He's known as "The Good Samaritan." The story is found in Luke 10:25-37, but right now let me read with you just v. 25-28. This helps us understand why Jesus told this story in the first place. Back in Jesus' day and time there was a professional group of men called "experts in the Law." They explained the requirements of the first five books of the Old Testament – often called the Law – to everyone else. But Luke tells us that this lawyer had an underlying motive for asking Jesus a question. Did you catch it? Yes, the motive was to test Jesus. He wanted to embarrass Jesus by throwing him a tough theological question and hopefully expose Jesus as being ignorant or dumb. It didn't work. Instead, Jesus asks him a question, "What's written in the law? How do you see it?" In other words, Jesus implies, "You're the expert here. Don't you know the answer to your own question?"

The law expert can't resist the temptation to show off a little theologically, so he gives Jesus an answer to his own question: "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 love your neighbor as yourself." It was a great answer! Jesus commends him and then adds this important statement, "Do this and you will live." Just a subtle, but important reminder right there that knowing and doing are two different things! It reminds me of 29 year old Johnny Lechner who finally graduated from the University of Wisconsin in Whitewater after being a full time student there for 12 years. Johnny said he'd stay longer if he could. "I'm just broke. I've got no more money. Trust me, if I had the money, I'd stay longer. The schedule is laid back; you're around all kinds of educated people. And we're all just broke college kids, too. It's not like the real world." What would you say to Johnny? Maybe you'd tell him to grow up, join the real world and start contributing to it. But, come to think of it, there are a lot of Johnny Lechner-type Christians out there! We stay in our safe environments and do our Bible studies. We're afraid to go out into the real world and put into practice what we know.

Well, let's read v. 29 now. Here's why Jesus told this story. It was in response to this law expert's question. Essentially, he's asking Jesus, "What's your definition of 'neighbor'?" In Jesus' day, your neighbor was usually thought of as someone near or close to you in terms of race and religion. So the law expert would

probably have said that loving your neighbor meant loving those who were already easy to love – people a lot like you. But if a person didn't fit those qualifications of race and religion, then he or she wasn't really a neighbor so the law didn't apply. The law expert was trying to excuse himself from following any interpretation of "neighbor" that was outside of his personal comfort zone. Friends, let's be honest, we all wrestle with the same temptation: we define loving others narrowly, we excuse inaction and we justify our avoidance of real people with real needs who just make us uncomfortable.

Let's read the story now – v. 30-37. We have a group of criminals. We have a man who gets robbed and mugged so badly he's half dead. Then three other characters come along. The first one is a priest. Priests were people of real importance and rank in Jesus' day. They offered sacrifices at the Temple and represented people before God. The second character is a Levite – another privileged group in Jewish society responsible for protecting the Temple and leading worship. If you'd been listening to Jesus' story, you'd have expected the third character to be just a good, old ordinary Jewish person. But much to everyone's surprise, Jesus said a Samaritan came along. It would be kind of like telling a story where the first character was Woody Hayes, the second character was Jim Tressel and the third character – the hero – was Rich Rodriguez. You have to know your Ohio State and Michigan football coaches to get that one! You could get hurt telling a story like that in Columbus, Ohio!

Samaritans and Jews despised each other. About 700 years earlier, Israel was invaded by Assyria. The Assyrians took lots of Israelites and moved them to other places in their empire and then brought in lots of foreigners and made them live in Israel. Eventually these new folk intermarried with the remaining Jews and became their own ethnic group – the Samaritans. They developed a religion that was an heretical version of Judaism. But by using a Samaritan as the hero in His story, Jesus was implying that what you do and how you live your life are more important than your religious background or theological orthodoxy. This Samaritan man was willing to take a divine detour on his own highway of life. May I suggest to you today that this was, first of all, ...

A DETOUR THAT TOOK A RISK.

The town of Telluride in southwestern Colorado is known for being a great resort and ski town. But it didn't always have that kind of reputation. Back in its Wild West days, the road to Telluride was so full of thugs who'd rob and mug you that the town got its name from the contraction "To Hell You Ride." The 17 mile road from Jerusalem to Jericho had the same kind of reputation in Jesus' day and a similar kind of name. It was known as "The Way of Blood." The road descends some 3300 feet through desert and rocky country that easily hid robbers. So, in Jesus' story, this poor traveler is beaten up badly and robbed of everything including his clothes.

When the Samaritan stopped to help, he knew he was on a dangerous road. He must have wondered if he would be the next victim. He might have even thought the beat up man was just pretending. Perhaps the Samaritan feared that if he helped the victim, the Samaritan himself would be mugged and robbed. But here's the point you should remember: the Samaritan didn't use risk as a justification not to act. Let's face it. We often excuse ourselves from not helping someone in need because we're afraid of the risk involved. "It might be a scam! He might become dependent on me. I can't solve her problem, so I just won't help at all." True, there are times when taking a risk just isn't a smart thing to do. But most of the time, your problem isn't that you take too many risks; it's that you don't take any risks. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "The first question the priest and the Levite asked was: 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But... the good Samaritan reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'" If you're going to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself, don't use risk as an excuse to hold back. Detours! Secondly, this was...

A DETOUR THAT TOOK PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT.

Many people use the excuse of not wanting to get personally involved in helping someone in need. What did the Samaritan do? He felt compassion and refused to ignore the injured man. He didn't walk over to the other side of the road and pretend he didn't see him. He stopped the bleeding. He poured some wine into the man's wounds to try and prevent infection. He dripped some olive oil on the man's bruised, cut skin to keep it soft and pliable. No doubt, he got dirty and sweaty helping that man. He probably got some of the man's blood on his own clothes. In other words, the Samaritan got personally involved.

Clive Collins, a 65 year old Englishman, experienced first hand the all too human tendency not to want to get personally involved. He was standing on a manhole cover opening his car trunk in a parking lot when the manhole cover tipped and he slipped into a five foot hole. He couldn't climb out without help. Clive said 15-20 people saw him and just walked by. He called out for help, but no one responded. One man looked right at him as he drove by Clive slowly in his car. Clive waved at him and he waved back. Despite suffering broken ribs, Clive finally managed to get his cell phone out of his pocket and called 999 (England's version of 911) himself. An ambulance finally came and took him to the hospital. He needed 47 stitches and treatment for two broken ribs, a chipped tooth and a strained groin. I don't know about priests and Levites among those folk, but there weren't any Samaritans! Detours! Thirdly, it was...

A DETOUR THAT TOOK TIME.

Sometimes people use their schedules to justify not helping people in need. This might well be the most common excuse of them all. What did the Samaritan do? He puts this poor man on his own donkey, finds the closest Hampton Inn at the

next exit, books a room for the two of them and takes care of him that night. He took his own time to stop and help. He realized his schedule wasn't God and he allowed it to be altered, changed and slowed down. Imagine that!

Malcolm Gladwell in his book, *The Tipping Point*, tells about a fascinating experiment some years by two Princeton University psychologists inspired by this story of the Good Samaritan. They met with a group of seminary students at Princeton Theological Seminary individually and asked each of them to prepare a short, off the cuff speech on a biblical theme and then walk over to a nearby building to present it. An actor was hired to play the part of a man slumped over, head down, eyes closed, coughing and groaning – a real mess. Each student would encounter this man along the way to the presentation. The question was, “Who would stop and help?”

These two psychologists threw in some variables. Each student was given a questionnaire about why he or she was studying theology. Then, each was given an assignment to speak about. Some of the students were asked to prepare a speech about why they wanted to become ministers. Others were asked to expound on the implications of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Finally, some students were told they were running late for their presentations while others were told they had plenty of time but they might as well head on over to where they were going to give the presentation. The results were interesting. Those who'd just been reminded of the importance of compassion by preparing their speeches on the Good Samaritan story were not more likely to stop and help the man in trouble than those who were assigned a different theme. What did matter, however, was the perception of time. The group that were told they were late and they'd better hurry - only 10% of them stopped to help. They group who were told they had plenty of time – 63% stopped to help.

Isn't that interesting? The words, “Oh, you're running late” had the effect of making someone who was ordinarily compassionate into someone who was indifferent to suffering. When it comes to helping those in need and loving your neighbor, the greatest ability may well be availability. If you're going to recognize many of life's detours as God's opportunities to love your neighbor, you won't use time as an excuse to hold back. Here's one more thought about the Samaritan's detour. Fourthly, it was...

A DETOUR THAT TOOK MONEY.

It's also so very easy to justify not helping those in need because it will hit our pocketbooks. What did the Samaritan do? He spent his own hard earned money to help this man in need. We're told he shelled out two silver coins to the Hampton Inn owner for his assistance which represented two days wages. Go ahead; do the math for yourself! A little stretching, yes? Apparently, this Samaritan was a businessman of some kind who regularly traveled this road and who knew the innkeeper. The Samaritan even tells the innkeeper that if this

man's recovery took longer, he'd be good for the additional cost involved. Margaret Thatcher, the former British Prime Minister, once observed, "No one would have remembered the Good Samaritan if he'd only had good intentions. He had money as well." Many times, it may take money to help the people God puts along your life's detours. If you're going to love your neighbor, don't use money as an excuse to hold back.

Did Jesus answer the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Yes, He did. Your neighbor isn't necessarily someone who lives next door to you. Your neighbor is anyone in need, anyone you can help. But Jesus asked this expert in the Old Testament a question after telling this story. "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.' Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:36-37 NIV) Jesus changed the focus of the question. It wasn't "Who is my neighbor?" but "What kind of a neighbor are you?"

Here's an interesting question. Would you want yourself as a neighbor? Would you be willing to take a divine detour because Jesus says that loving God and others is what we're called to do as His followers? The good Samaritan was willing to disadvantage himself to advantage someone else. Detours. Jesus calls you and me to disadvantage ourselves to advantage others. Friends, I'll be the first one to tell you that I don't like detours from my schedule, from my plans for the week or from my little list of daily activities. But I'm learning – slowly but surely – that God is often found in life's detours - in those unplanned opportunities God puts along my pathway to serve Him by serving others. So a Faith in Action lifestyle welcomes divine detours and see in them opportunities to demonstrate God's love to people in need.

Jesus' story about the good Samaritan is a story about detours. If you're serious about being a follower of Jesus, you will reach a place where you can at least be open to detours in life if not thrilled by them. You can see in them opportunities to be used by Jesus to touch the lives of others who are in need. Those kinds of spiritual detours may well demand risk, personal involvement, time and money from each of us. But beyond the sacrifice and the inconvenience will be that knowledge – precious beyond words – that God is using you to be a channel of His love into the lives of those who need to experience it. That's what a Faith in Action lifestyle is all about!