

A woman telephoned a friend and asked how she was feeling.

“Terrible,” was the reply. “My head’s splitting; I’ve got a pain in my back, and my legs ache all over...the house is a mess, and the children are driving me crazy.”

Was it one of you she called?

“Listen,” said the woman caller, “you go and lie down. I’ll come right over, fix some lunch for you, take care of the kids while you get some rest, clean up a little bit and then have supper ready for when Sam gets home.”

“Sam?” asked the hurting housewife.

“Yes, your husband.”

“My husband is Joe, not Sam.”

“Oh my goodness, I must have the wrong number!”

There was a long pause on the other end, “Are you still coming over?”

And that’s the point of this old, familiar parable.

This man is walking the road from Jerusalem down to Jericho. It’s a road that is best traveled in the safety of a group rather than alone.

Anyone with half a brain knew it was the fool who tempted fate by traveling alone.

But the Good Samaritan goes over to the one who is hurting because she hears in the “*Are you still coming over?*” the urgency of the love required – quite aside from any of the normal procedures of getting to know each other, making friends, traveling in a dangerous neighborhood, what might happen to me – just *she needs me here and now*.

The Samaritan goes over and binds up his wounds.

Hans Kung puts it in lawyer language, when says of this story: It leaves no loopholes for excuses or equivocations.

No room for the priestly excuse: I help in other ways; I’ve already donated at the office.

No more room for the Levitical equivocation: He has only himself to blame for being in that situation.

A love without loopholes. That was new for the lawyer back then, and it’s a dulled point for us today – with all our policies and biases and prejudices and politics and just plain old laziness – our excuses, our equivocations.

Wanda, a nurse, was talking to a church’s Session about her CPR class and recommended defibrillators for the church to have for emergencies, how it could save a life.

One elder spoke up, “The church’s role is to save souls, not lives!” Then he realized what he said, “Anyway, it costs too much!”

And the discussion revolved around those two questions for the rest of the meeting - just what do we save and how much will it cost!

But in Jesus’ story - which began with question about salvation, the Good Samaritan goes over, and the one who asked the question in the first place finds out that neighbor might be a wrong number, a complete stranger, and Jesus shows us that if you are going to live in the kingdom of God, the real question is not what it will cost but “how much am I willing to commit?”

And that’s more than the point of this old, familiar parable – it’s the personal, the person, the power of this parable.

Jesus turns to us all and seeks an explanation of our answer when he asks, “Are you still coming over?”

What Jesus wants to know is if you and I are willing to join him in the adventure of mercy, both for others and for ourselves.

Because Jesus is asking us if we want to set limitations on love, to limit our love by how others look or worship or lifestyles...or do you want to live out the generosity of God to go to any who need you?

John Calvin wrote: *Now, in seeking to benefit one's neighbor, how difficult it is to do one's duty! Unless you give up all thought of self and, so to speak, get out of yourself, you will accomplish nothing here. For how can you perform those works which Paul teaches to be the works of love, unless you renounce yourself and give yourself wholly to others?*

Let me stop – how did you hear what I just said: ‘wholly’ with a ‘w-h-o-l-l-y’ or holy with a ‘h-o-l-y’?

Could it be that they are actually one and the same – to give oneself ‘w-h’ wholly is the same as a ‘h-o’ holy act in the name of Jesus Christ?

Or to be ‘h-o’ holy is to give one’s self ‘w-h-o’ wholly to God.

The question is whether you see this church as a force or a fixture.

The dictionary defines ‘fixture’ as the ‘state of being fixed.’ In other words, not subject to change!

I know that flies in the face of what happens here – we are constantly facing change, each one of us – both by circumstance and opportunity.

And the dictionary defines ‘force’ in many ways. One of the ways is this: “to press, drive, attain, or effect against resistance or inertia.”

Leslie Newbigin, a great missionary and keen observer of the church, describes the faithful church in those terms.

He says, *“The church that is a force for God will be a community of praise...a community of truth...a community that does not live for itself...a community where men and women are prepared for and sustained in the exercise of their priesthood of believers in the world...a communion of mutual responsibility...a community of hope.*

We are doing that all the time – this church is known throughout this community, and its people are the forces behind it – in this church’s capacity to influence, your desire to help – a force for God and for good today...

Just look at these food bags, what good they will do – but, even more, how they represent our own lives and can we give ourselves to the real people that are on the other side.

Can we see them...Are we willing to go ourselves to all those who are hungry for justice, who are hungry to live without fear of hate and harm because they worship differently than us, because they look differently than us, because they have a different lifestyle than us...

Are we willing to cross the street and to be a force – moving against injustice, to stand with any who are being verbally or physically assaulted, the mistreatment of any of God’s children?

Along the road we travel - from Haiti to Hancock Street - They may not be beaten down or lying by the road, but there are people we pass by.

Some are family and friends who maybe we take for granted, and simply don’t see how they are weighed down by pain and sorrow, worn out by day after day demands and difficulties, those depressed by the cruelties of nature, those who are slaves to their own passions and desires.

Others are neighbors: who wonder and worry what Monday morning will bring – waiting for a doctor’s diagnosis, insecurity at work, the pressures of school, stretched at keeping a home and family together, or those whose Monday is just another day alone.

Many are strangers, people we don't know, but quickly judge: they are weak, or poor, or the enemy or because they remind us of who we once were, or could become; who have been left half-dead by crushing work; who have fallen into the hands of despair; who have been abandoned by all those who pass by on the other side.

Along the road we travel, there are people looking, they are wondering, they are asking:

Are you still coming over?

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.