

**“The Neighbors Among Us”**  
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Col 1:1-14, Luke 10:25-37

Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

In Paul’s letter to the Colossians, he makes note of the Colossians’ great faith in God, and the ways that their faith is bearing fruit in good works. He is excited and hopeful for them. As a result, he tells them that he prays for them to have strength and endurance, and that they be able to give joyful thanks to God while enduring patiently. This is an interesting part of this letter, this idea that those who are already full of faith, those who already live out their faith with good works, need prayers of strength and of patient, joyful endurance.

We can imagine this new church. They have just recently heard the story of Jesus. Witnesses have excitedly told them about Jesus’ teachings, about how he died and was resurrected, and about how they are all called into a new life of discipleship. We can imagine the first worship services, with the singing of hymns, with people retelling Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount or reading Paul’s letters, and with the community sharing the sacrament of communion. And we can imagine the people going back out into their community, trying to live out their new faith by caring for the widows, orphans and strangers, and by sharing meals with the hungry.

But Paul knows something that the excited, new church does not yet know—living out our faith can be really hard sometimes. There are all sorts of obstacles to maintaining faith and to performing good works in the world. To be able to uphold our faith in the midst of these obstacles does require patience, strength, and fortitude. To be able to do so joyfully...well, that probably requires even more endurance. Our gospel lesson from Luke helps us see some of these obstacles. In this very familiar story, a faithful man leaves the holy city, Jerusalem, and walks a road that is known to be very dangerous. He is brutally attacked, robbed and left for dead on the highway. His condition is bad enough that he cannot get himself to safety and, when someone finally helps him, it seems that the man will need care for some time. Surely, this event tried his faith and made it difficult for him to do any work at all, let alone good works.

I’m sure we can sympathize. There are times in our lives when we’re walking the path, the road from the center of our faith or the road from our church and out into the “real” world. We know the path is dangerous, just as the man in our story knows that the road to Jericho is dangerous, but we never really expect that anything bad will happen to us. The dangers we face might not be of the same nature as those faced by the man in our story: Our dangers might be those posed by illness or addiction, by distracted drivers, hazardous weather (like tornados, floods, or earthquakes), or the dangers posed by losing a job, the dangers of poverty, or the dangers posed to our minds and emotions from loss. Or the dangers we face might, indeed, be similar to those faced by the man in the story. If the statistics of our general population apply to our congregation, then there are those among us who have survived or are surviving abuse, attacks, and violence.

Any one of these things can stop us on our faith journey, causing us to doubt our faith or at least cause us to pause in our service to God and one another. It is certainly common to doubt God or aspects of our faith when something terrible happens in our lives. We wonder how God can allow such things to happen, or we can find it difficult to connect with God. So how do we endure such times? How does our faith endure? Where does our strength come from and how can we even consider joyfully giving thanks to God in the midst of such times?

The story I told our children suggests that one way we can endure is by trusting in our loved ones. Most of the time, we can. And, just like the man in that story, we find that we can keep going way past the point when we think that we are physically or emotionally drained just because we know that we have the support of our loved ones.

But the story of the Good Samaritan presents a more difficult truth. Sometimes, our friends let us down. Sometimes, even the people we love the most—our family, our friends, our church—they just fail us. In the story of the Good Samaritan, the man who is attacked is almost definitely counting on someone from Jerusalem helping him. The Jericho road, though dangerous, was well traveled. And, in fact, a priest and a Levite come by him. A Levite was a church leader who taught the faithful how to follow scripture—very similar to our understanding of a pastor or maybe a church elder. And they both ignore him. These two men represent all the ways that the church can fail its people or, worse, ways that the church can and has betrayed people.

On a minor scale, every church will fail its people at some point. Churches are made up of humans and, as much as we try to follow Jesus' example, we still make mistakes. And sometimes, those mistakes hurt people. But what we see in this story is not a case of someone making a mistake and accidentally harming a church member; what we see here is willful neglect. The priest and Levite come along, they each see the hurt and bleeding man, and they each walk to the other side of the road and leave him there to die. This is a complete betrayal of the man's trust and hope.

We don't have to think hard to come up with modern examples of this kind of betrayal—church scandals where priests and church leaders have sexually assaulted their people, or cases where the church degrades and casts out people in the LGBTQIA+ community. Since the church should be a safe place, and the people in the church should be our people, our community—the ones we can count on, when we feel betrayed by them, the effects on the survivor tend to be more severe than when a person is harmed by a stranger. Our faith in people, particularly in all the people who we trust, can be shaken. We can definitely lose faith in God, since the people who betrayed us were supposed to have been “good” people of faith. So we can imagine that enduring through this kind of hurt is even harder. So how do we do that? How do we find strength and endurance in the midst of that kind of pain and doubt?

In the story of the Good Samaritan, it is a Samaritan who stops to help. The Samaritans and Jews really didn't like each other at the time. In particular, the Jewish community looked down upon and marginalized the Samaritans. Many of the people hearing this story would have expected the Samaritan to regard the man as his enemy, to perhaps kick him while he was down, even. But that's not what happened. Jesus tells us that this Samaritan, the enemy and the Other was the one to help the man. Not only did the Samaritan get him to safety, but he paid for his care as well!

So it seems that the answer presented in the Good Samaritan story about how we can endure even when those we love and trust betray us is by trusting in the goodness of those we regard as Other. And we can trust them because we know and believe that God is working in the world, in and through others. Last week, I told the story of the Old Turtle and Broken Truth. Part of the message of that story is that we need to learn to listen to others—the truths that we can hear from the breezes, the trees, and from people who are different and other. The goal of this is to stop seeing them as other, and to see them as us—as our neighbor.

Importantly, we are not the only ones hearing this message. The message of altruism, of loving one's neighbor, is found almost universally in almost every religion, every philosophy, every culture. Our faith teaches that the Holy Spirit is speaking all of the time, guiding the entire world and helping us to hear the needs of others. If we have faith, we can trust, then, that even when our friends or family fail to listen to that voice, someone will. Someone will see us as their neighbor, as part of their "us," and they will help us.

I have heard many, many stories of strangers and enemies acting as good Samaritans, and I will share one with you now that happened to me on one of my mission trips to Pine Ridge Native American Reservation in South Dakota. I almost didn't go because of some life struggles I was facing. Someone I cared about deeply had attempted suicide. She hadn't succeeded, but I was working with her and was very worried about her. In addition to that, one of my children was very sick, and I had a new boss at work who acted the tyrant. He treated us cruelly so that each day was a burden. Overall, I felt spiritually sick, exhausted, emotionally drained and just...helpless. It didn't seem like the best time to go on a mission trip, but I was a trip leader and so I felt that I should go.

On our first day on the reservation, we went to a Pow Wow where there were a lot of art vendors. We walked around, looking and talking to vendors, and I started talking to a man named Myron who was selling blankets. We mainly just talked about where we were from, what we were both doing there, etc.

Then, he suddenly looked at me closely and asked, "in all of the natural world, who or what praises God the most?"

I wondered and thought, and guessed that maybe it is the birds because they are constantly singing.

"Good guess," he said, "but no. It's the trees. The trees always have their hands outstretched to God. All day and all night, they praise God. Isn't it odd," he said. "Trees have no minds or hearts, but they do better than us."

"Listen to the trees, to nature, to the Holy Spirit in them," he said to me. "Listen to them, and you will be healed."

I walked away, shocked. How did he know I needed any healing? We hadn't talked about that. And how did he know to say exactly what I needed to hear? Often, when I am most needing to endure, if I offer praise to God and think about all the things that I am grateful for, I do find healing.

I walked around a little more, thinking. Suddenly, the man was standing next to me again. In one hand, he held a half-eaten sandwich and he was out of breath:

“The Holy Spirit spoke to me, he said, and told me that I needed to talk to you some more. So I came. You need to know that everything will be alright. You need to give everything up to God and trust in God. You just need to listen to Spirit, meditate in nature. Then you will hear God’s voice. Listen to what God says and *say* what God says. This will heal you.” Then he gave me a hug, took his sandwich and went back to his booth.

His name was Myron and he was a neighbor that I didn’t know I’d find that day. He could have regarded me as an enemy. I am white and he is Native American. He could have grouped me among those who had destroyed his culture and his people. But he didn’t. He saw me as a neighbor in need and, when he heard the Holy Spirit speaking to him, asking him to help me, he reacted so fast, so immediately, that he stopped eating his dinner to come and find me!

And because of him, I stopped letting myself worry about my life and just listened to what I heard from other people, from the wind, and from the trees. It was one of the more amazing weeks of my life.

We cannot underestimate the effects of the kindness of strangers, especially when those strangers had been perceived of as enemies. This kindness has the potential to give hope to what would otherwise be a hopeless situation. It can give us strength, when we have none. And it can help us endure the worst of times, feeling a profound gratitude for the stranger who has suddenly become our neighbor.

So at the moments when you feel most alone and need most to endure, know this and trust it to be true: There *are* people out there—others, strangers--who listen to the word of God in the breezes, in the rivers, and in their hearts. Even in our worst times, they will show up and be the neighbors we never knew we had. Thanks be to God.