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Psalm 121, Luke 10:25-37

"Neighborhood Pitch-In"

Summer has always been for me synonymous with the going to the beach and the mountains. Growing up in South Carolina, neither was a major trip. It was possible to go from home to the beach or to the mountains in about two hours. As a child, I loved the sun, the hot white sand and the warm water. We spent hours body surfing in the relatively gentle Atlantic waves. Since I have grown, there is something that draws me to the mountains. Perhaps it is spending some part of almost every summer for the last 30 years at conferences at Montreat, the Presbyterian Conference Center near Black Mountain, NC. There is something that lifts my spirits every time I see the gentle rolling blue green form of the Smokey Mountains rise on the horizon. When I see those mountains, it is easy for the mind to drift to the words of the 121st Psalm:

I lift up my eyes to the hills from where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

These familiar words have within themselves the power to bring comfort. The Psalmist connected the wonderful solidity of the hills with the magnificent firmness of God's care and keeping. Perhaps, more specifically, the Jewish pilgrim on the road to Jerusalem was comforted by the sight of the hills of the city where God dwelt in the Holy Temple.

There is also a distinct possibility that the first line of this familiar psalm does not mean at all what we think it means. The lonely traveler on the road in Palestine faced many dangers. Travel was difficult. The hills only made it worse. The hills were hard to cross. They also provided a place where robbers could hide, waiting to pounce on the unsuspecting solitary traveler. Looking up at the hills may have caused fear and insecurity to rise up in the traveler's heart. In a dangerous place, the pilgrim's thoughts quickly turned to the Lord who alone could help in time of trouble.

Jesus tells a parable about a man who runs into trouble while he is traveling down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Robbers come out of nowhere, pounce on him, beat him, strip him of his clothes, steal his belongings and leave him for dead. A priest going from Jerusalem to Jericho sees the body beside the road and passes by on the other side. Soon after, a Levite, a Temple servant, also sees the man and passes by on the other side. Over the years, we have so vilified the character of the priest and the Levite that they have become little more than a caricature of religious hypocrisy. We forget that the priest and Levite may have had good reasons for not stopping to help the fallen man.

In his study, *Through Peasant Eyes*, Kenneth Bailey writes of the cultural and religious background of the parables of Jesus. Bailey notes that the priest has just come from

Jerusalem where he has performed his religious obligations. He is ritually clean. If the man is dead, even to come near the man is to become defiled. Perhaps his family is waiting on their share of the offerings he has received in Jerusalem and which he must deliver in ritual purity. Without clothes and without speech, who can tell whether or not the wounded man is even a Jew? There was no question that a believer has an obligation to help a neighbor, that is, a fellow believer or someone known. Yet there was a vigorous debate among the rabbis about the extent of one's obligation to and the propriety of helping a Gentile, a sinner, or one's enemy. In a similar manner, the Levite, although he appears to come closer, passes by without becoming entangled in what could have been a messy affair. (Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1980, pages 33-56).

Just like the robbers, the priest and Levite come and go without providing what is needed. In the eyes of God, I doubt if there is very much difference between the evil the robbers do and the good the religious leaders leave undone. There are always a lot of good reasons for not doing the things that some inner voice declares ought to be done. Staying within the narrow limits of their understanding of religious duty, the priest and Levite turn their back on someone in serious need.

Then a despised Samaritan comes upon the man, goes to his aid, binds his wounds, anoints him with wine and oil, carries him on his own donkey to an inn, stays with him as long as he can, and returns to pay for his care. The language describing the Samaritan's actions is the language the scriptures use in other places to describe God's care for the people. God binds up the wounds of the people. The Samaritan has compassion on the man just like Jesus, the Shepherd, has compassion on the hungry crowds. Wine and oil, which the Samaritan uses to cleanse and disinfect the wounds of the man, are also used in ritual offerings in the Temple. The Samaritan's act of binding and healing the wounds of the man is a holy act that foreshadows the saving work of Jesus. As Kenneth Bailey notes, the robbers steal from the man, abandon him, and leave him to die; the Samaritan pays for his needs, stays with him and promises to return. Bailey writes that the Samaritan appears "dramatically on the scene to bind up the wounds of the suffering as the unique agent of God's costly demonstration of unexpected love." (*Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, p. 56).

This whole story unfolds in response to the lawyer's question, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asks the lawyer what the law says. The lawyer responds that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind and to love our neighbors as ourselves. The lawyer asks another question, "Who is my neighbor?" Then Jesus tells the parable to demonstrate how our love for God is seen in how we love the neighbor and to show the costly character of such love. He also tells the parable to demonstrate that we ask the wrong question. The question, "Who is my neighbor?" puts us at a distance from those around us who need attention and our help. We can define the neighbor so narrowly that we limit our sense of moral obligation and feelings of compassion to those in our family, among our friends, in our church, or who share our political or economic interests. We may spend so much

energy trying to determine who deserves our help that we never actually get around to helping anybody.

Therefore Jesus demonstrates that the question is not, “Who is my neighbor?” but “Who acts like a neighbor to the one in need?” The neighbor is everyone in need whom God has put in our path. We too are to be “agents of God’s costly demonstration of unexpected love.” Such love takes time, personal resources and human energy. Anyone who has ever served as a mentor to a child, cared for an elderly person forgotten by others, labored to improve schools or public housing, lobbied to change a law, or worked with a family in distress, knows just how much work love requires.

All of us pass down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. At some time or another, all of us notice the rough places and dangerous hills; we see the people who have fallen among thieves or been tripped up by the rocky places of life. Our neighborhood begins at the front doors of this church. It extends north to Carmel, Noblesville and beyond. It goes down Meridian Street to the near East Side and beyond. Our neighborhood extends to every place we live, work, go to school, vacation and travel. You might say that our neighborhood is as large as the world. In this neighborhood, Jesus is calling us to be “agents of God’s costly demonstration of unexpected love.”

We have a task force in our congregation studying the kind of neighbors God is calling us to be with the children and their families who live around Westminster Presbyterian Church in the near East Side. For more than 20 years, we have been in partnership with Westminster Church. Westminster ministries support an after school program that provides safe care and Christian nurture for over 50 children, a food pantry that serves 5,000 to 8,000 families a year, and legal aid to residents of the neighborhood. The good neighbors in this congregation who serve as mentors to the children tell stories that bring joy and pain. The question is not are these children our neighbors, but what kind of neighbors will we be. How will we be “agents of God’s costly demonstration of unexpected love?”

Our neighborhood doesn’t end there. Rev. Dr. Haruun Ruun and his family were members of the congregation I served in Columbia, SC. Haruun and Mary Ruun and their five children are Sudanese. He is the son of a Dinka chieftain. As a boy he lost his arm due to a fall from a tree. His arm never healed. What good is a chieftain’s son with only one arm? The villagers blamed his accident on his uncle because he had become a Christian. Haruun was sent to England by some missionaries so that he could have surgery on his arm. While he was there, almost all of Haruun’s family and friends in the village were murdered by the government troops. Haruun believed God has spared him for a purpose. They left Sudan so that Haruun could complete his studies for the ministry. He has dedicated his life to spreading the gospel and working for peace among the warring tribes in southern Sudan. For many years, he has been in Africa as the General Secretary of the New Sudan Council of Churches while his wife, Mary, stayed in Columbia raising their five children.

Not long before I left Columbia, we learned that Dr. Ruun had received the Spirit of Raul Wallenberg award from the government of Sweden for his humanitarian work. Raoul Wallenberg was a Swedish Diplomat in Budapest, Hungary, who saved the lives of thousands of Jews from the Nazis. When the Soviets occupied Budapest at the end of the war, Wallenberg was taken captive and disappeared. Haruun and Mary Ruun's lives have been a "costly demonstration of unexpected love."

What if we could image living in a neighborhood that stretches as far as the eye can see in which everyone contributes to the neighborhood the best gifts they have. The neighborhood would be a safe place where robbers cannot fall on unsuspecting travelers and where the most vulnerable people have other folks who look out for them. In this neighborhood, folks would get together as community instead of just passing by on the other side. Gatherings would be like a neighborhood pitch-in. Only instead of bringing Jerry's homegrown tomatoes, Rhonda's barbecue ribs, John's sweet corn and Doris's peach cobbler, these neighbors would bring their hammers to build habitat houses, their gifts for teaching the Bible, their patience to work with children who have no one at home to care for them, their cars to pick up people who don't have rides, their gentle touch for the elderly who need someone to write their letters, their healing touch for the sick and grieving, and their love of justice so the mentally ill get the care they need and the homeless find shelter.

I believe that the guest of honor at this neighborhood pitch-in would be Jesus.