

#789 The Gospel Lives!

Colleagues,

I'm at the age where arrogance and world-weariness start combining in what John Bunyan would call a slough of despond. I read and hear the rubbish that gets peddled in the church these days under the rubric "gospel," and wonder if anybody forty years hence will still get it as we did in our day. (Implication, God help me: "Ain't we grand for having gotten it as we did.")

But then comes last week's treat of Matt Metevelis responding to Tim Hoyer, and, all the more refreshing since in this case I don't know the author, the one we're sending you today.

Candice Stone graduated this May from the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. In a mystery I haven't penetrated, she's even so completing a "terminal internship" at Bethel Lutheran Church in University Heights, Missouri, under the tutelage of a schoolmate of mine, Pr. Bill Yancey. Bethel is also the congregation that Ed and Marie Schroeder have belonged to for the past many decades. And that's how it happened that Candice came to send us the sermon we share with you below. She preached it the Sunday before last (July 14) on the parable of the Good Samaritan, [Luke 10:25-37](#). Before reading you'll want to refresh yourself on the [Old Testament Lesson and Psalm](#) of the day.

Candice hits the same key notes that I tried to hit in my preaching on that same day, only she does it much more clearly and effectively, and in a way that draws the entire listening audience into the promise and joy of Christ. I am humbled (thank God), but even more I'm greatly cheered. In the generation behind me is yet another servant of Christ who gets it vividly and well, and by whom the Gospel will be well served indeed. Be

refreshed by what she writes—and then pray for her, and for all others of her ilk who will keep the Word of Christ in play as coming decades unfold.

This just in, by the way: Candice will soon be knuckling down to the arduous task of filing paperwork toward a first call in the ELCA. If you know of a congregation that's hunting for a pastor who knows how to preach, you might drop her name. I've also just learned that her connection to the Crossings community runs deeper than I had guessed. She gives much of the credit for knowing the sound of genuine Gospel to Ron Neustadt, her pastor and mentor for several years at St. Mark Lutheran Church in Belleville, Illinois. Ron continues in retirement to serve as one of Crossings' current pillars.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

A Sermon on the Parable of the Good Samaritan, by Intern Candice
Stone

A professor of mine, when talking about our relationship with God, said, "The young demand justice, the old will settle for mercy." I have reframed that in my mind, not based on age, but based on where I'm at in life—what season I am in. There are times when my energy is high and my concerns are very much rooted in the daily here and now, and I want justice. And then there have been times, serious times of heartbreak or sickness, where all I really wanted was assurance of God's mercy and forgiveness. All this is to say that our God speaks to us in all of our seasons. I realize this whenever Jesus shares lessons through story, because stories can speak to many seasons; they are not usually speaking to just one.

Today's story is the Good Samaritan. Let's rehash a bit. There

is person, a man who has been stripped and beaten by robbers, then left for dead on the side of the road. Lying there, we don't know what the injuries are exactly; we just know all he can do is lie there and wait for death. He is stuck in that ditch. A priest passes him and probably judges him defiled, doesn't want mess with purity laws, so he leaves him. Likewise the Levite walks by, probably judges him a different ethnicity, doesn't want to mess with a dirty foreigner, so he leaves him. Finally, the Samaritan walks by. And surely like the other two men, he makes a judgment on this naked, dying man. But his judgment is that he needs to be pulled from the ditch. He judges that he needs life. So he does what it takes to give it to him. Binds his wounds, feeds him, takes him to an inn, pays for his care.

So who's who in this story, who are we, who are you? Who is Jesus? If this story were purely about giving instruction, then we are the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan. If we are the Levite or priest, then our instructions are to quit being so cruel and uncaring, so Letter-of-the-Law, and to help our poor neighbor. If we're lucky enough to be the Samaritan, then this is an "Atta Boy!" story. Good job, Good Samaritan! Good work following instructions and helping people in need no matter what they look like or who they are.

But we, being good Lutherans, know this story is not just simply instructions. We've gotten those before and they didn't work—look at our Old Testament readings! No, this story is about justification. Jesus tells this story because the lawyer he's talking to wants to know what it takes to be justified before God. In other words, what does it take to be right with God, to be assured of life through God?

And because this story is about being right with God, we don't get to be the Good Samaritan, but neither do we get to be the

priest or the Levite. We are, to be direct, that poor soul lying half dead in a ditch. This story is all about you, me, all of us lying in need of Jesus, our Good Samaritan, to come pull us out and into life with God and each other. Just like we don't know the exact injuries of the dying man, what keeps us in our ditch depends on our season in life.

Perhaps it's that big season, that big question about eternity that troubles us. And in that case, we wonder, "Will God be merciful, will the promise of eternal life be real for me"? The Good News for us is that our Good Samaritan, Jesus, accomplishes all things for us. We are justified by our faith, our trust in Christ whose life, death, and resurrection we get to share in. That is no small season, and it rears its head at us again and again in our lives both when we encounter death and finally when it encounters us. And so, in that season, we need to hear often of how Jesus promises to pull us out of that ditch and into eternal life with God; to hear that no matter what our injuries look like, how bruised or damaged we are by this world, by sin or doubt, Jesus will bring us into life with God.

But there are other seasons of life, where something else is keeping us in the ditch, away from life here and now: life in our communities, life in our churches, in our families, in our relationships. At the text study I go to, we were talking about this. And one of my good friends who is an openly gay pastor in the ELCA said, "Heck, my whole community didn't get pulled out of the ditch until 2009!" It's true, the Holy Spirit is still working to pull people out of ditches who are there not because they need mercy for sin, but because they need justice now. I don't know where anybody stands this morning, but there are all kinds of people on both sides of every verdict in this country that need to be pulled out of ditches for reasons of sin, or mercy, or justice. That is the work of a God of all seasons, whose Good Samaritan Son is constantly pulling us into life

eternal and life present.

The question today is, "Where are you? What season are you in?" Maybe both are weighing on you. Maybe neither right now. Maybe you are in one of those blessed seasons where you are just assured and nothing has got you in the ditch, nothing is keeping you from life. And what a blessing it is for the world, for your community, if you are in that great season where you're even able to do some relief work with Jesus; where you can look around and see, "Hey, there are people in ditches, let's do something here!" Make no mistake, that is the Holy Spirit working through you to be a Good Samaritan, not because you're instructed to, but because you are hooked into Jesus through faith and he is working through you.

But maybe that's not your season right now. And maybe you're needing to be pulled out of the ditch right now. And what keeps you there is not for others to judge or know. I pray the communities you find yourself in this week don't fall into that priest or Levite role for you. But if you are in a ditch season, be assured by *this* community that the Holy Spirit is at work for life present. And in case you can't see it happening here and now, let me reframe this story for you one more time.

Jesus, your Good Samaritan pulled you in from the road today and brought you in to the innkeeper's home. It's his Father's House. Isn't it lovely? It's even got a pipe organ! And he washes your wounds. Actually he washes you totally clean of all that separates you from life with God with waters of Holy Baptism. Pretty soon, he's going to nourish you with bread and wine, his own body given to you at the table of Holy Communion. And last but not least, he turns to the innkeeper and says, "Take care of her, take care of him. I'll pay whatever it takes."

And he does. Jesus is so determined to bring life, so determined

to pull us out of death, both eternally and presently, that he goes to the cross. In that decisive, sacrificial moment of love, Jesus gives us life for all seasons. Thanks be to God.

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