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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Deuteronomy 30:9-14, Psalm 25, Colossians 1:1-14, Luke 10:25-37
The Good Samaritan

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³³But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, ³⁴and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. (Luke 10:33, RSV)

Let's start this sermon on the Good Samaritan by taking a look at the artwork I have placed on the cover of this morning's worship folder: Vincent van Gogh's painting of *The Good Samaritan* from 1890:



You see that the Good Samaritan has a donkey. If he lifts the wounded man up onto his donkey, it means that the Good Samaritan himself is now going to have to walk the rest of the way to the inn. That is perhaps the least of his mercies, but it is a real one. For all we know, the Good Samaritan might have been a rich man, who could well spare the two denarii he left with the innkeeper. But even if he were rich, his wealth could not spare him the concrete inconvenience of walking the rest of the way to the inn, once he has given his donkey to the wounded man.

Furthermore, when the Good Samaritan brings the poor man to the inn, our text says that he took care of him:

...he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn,
and *took care of him*. (Luke 10:34)

I had not noticed this detail before. I had pictured the Good Samaritan as delivering the man to the inn, asking the innkeeper to take care of him, giving him the money and promising to give more if need be, and then going on his way. But that's not what happened. For the first day, the Good Samaritan himself tends to the man. He has already bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. He practiced what medicine he could at the scene of the crime. Now, at the inn, he continues to take care of the man.

There is no way around it: the Good Samaritan has *put himself out* to do this good deed. He has accepted inconvenience into his life for the sake of doing some good in this world.

Oh! He has done more than that. He has also placed himself in *danger* by lingering on that road that had been the undoing of so many others. Why, for all he knew, the robbers who had waylaid this man were still at hand. Indeed, maybe they were lying in wait to see whether anyone would stop and help the poor man. Then they would attack the first responders, as cruel people do. If so, the Good Samaritan seems to hesitate not at all. There is a man in need here, he seems to say. Time's a wastin'!

The thing I especially love about van Gogh's painting is the combination of practical strength and muscle it takes to hoist the injured man onto the donkey along with the gentleness and compassion of the act. If this is what our God is like, then we have a good God indeed! The kindness on display in this story is akin to that of the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, where the old man gathers up his robes around him his knees, runs to his son, embraces him and kisses him. Who can miss the practical love at work in either of these stories, in either the story of the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan?

THE BROTHERHOOD OF HUMANITY

Another man might have said, “He is a stranger to me. Why should I stop for him?” Indeed, that might have been the quiet thought of the priest and the Levite as they pass by. But the Good Samaritan seems to have thought to himself, “Aye, he is a stranger to me, not even a person of the same faith as my own. But he is a man, and I mean to help him.”

And so it is that the Good Samaritan treats the broken man as a true brother. And he is. In spite of their religious differences, they are both descended from one mother and father, Adam and Eve. This is one of Israel’s most revolutionary items of faith, in my opinion. This little land and people in the middle east was inspired to write her scriptures with the bold claim that that the Irishman up north and the Sudanese to the south and the Persian to the East were brother and sister to them. Good for the Good Samaritan for understanding something that Israel and the Church should understand too.

BUILT FOR GOOD WORKS

In my opinion, the story of the Good Samaritan is a beautiful illustration of one of the happiest verses in the Bible. It is the saying of Saint Paul about good works:

¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10, RSV)

The optimism in this verse is wonderful! This verse suggests that good works are our natural way of life. We are built for them. The kind of thing that the Good Samaritan did is our natural way of life. It is the manner of life that most suits our souls. What the Good Samaritan did is not extraordinary—it is not far off in the realms of saints and angels. It is simply the right manner of life for us.

Our friend Robert W. Jenson presses this point with some words about what is at stake in whether or not we obey the holy commandments of God. He says this:

At stake is whether we and our communities and our world are gifts of God to one another or a horror. The world described by the commandments, the world of true worship and loyalty and chastity and truth, of love to God and the

neighbor, maybe the real world, or of course it may not.
On which do we bet our lives?¹

One thing we can say about the Good Samaritan is that in his kindness to the poor man he illustrates the intention of our Maker for us that we should be “a gift to one another.”

THE EARLY CHURCH

I am proud to say that when the young Christian church burst on the scene of the pagan Roman Empire, the onlookers noted the charity of these strange new Christians, and in noting, were impressed.

At the end of this morning’s reading, Jesus asks the lawyer a question about the parable. He asks about the three characters — the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan:

³⁶Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?³⁷ He said, “The one who showed mercy on him.” And Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:36-37, RSV)

These final words of our Lord — “Go, and do thou likewise” — have been obeyed by many a Christian through the centuries. High and low, rich and poor, fancy theologians and plain fishermen, they have all heard the winsome words of Jesus and have been moved by them toward holy lives.

You might have heard that our own Rev. Kelly-Ray Meritt has recently returned to us from Ankara, Turkey. By bus, you can travel four-and-a-half miles from Ankara, the capitol city of Turkey, in a southeasterly direction to a region called Cappadocia. To church historians, that ancient region was home to three of the most brilliant theologians in the early church—the Cappadocian fathers: Basil the Great (330-379), who was bishop of Caesarea; Basil’s younger brother Gregory of Nyssa (c.332-395), who was bishop of Nyssa; and a close friend, Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389), who became Patriarch of Constantinople. They were great defenders of the Trinitarian settlements at the Council of Nicaea (325).

So, Cappadocia is famous for its theologians and for its monks and hermits. What is less known is that Cappadocia gave birth to a great flowering of compassion on the poor and to this world’s first modern hospital. These great things were done by people who heard Jesus say “Go, and do thou likewise,”

¹ Robert W. Jenson, *The Lectionary Commentary—The First Readings* (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001), page 141.

and they leapt to obedience. Let me tell you some of the details. I read about this in Robert Wilken's recent book *The First Thousand Years*:

In the year 368 Cappadocia suffered a terrible famine brought about by a very dry winter, when the skies offered neither rain nor snow. Because the region was inland, without access to the sea, and isolated, it was particularly vulnerable to food shortages. Hungry men and women roamed the roads looking like cadavers, and parents exposed or sold their infants. The suffering of the people, said Basil's friend Gregory, was intensified by the "insensitivity and greed" of the wealthy. When food ran out, the rich thought only of their own welfare and began to hoard what they had gathered in their barns. Seeing an opportunity to take a profit, they turned the distress of others into a boon for themselves.²

In a homily on the parable in the Gospel of Luke about the rich man who laid up treasure for himself (Luke 12:16–21), Basil speaks with great feeling about the lot of the poor:

How can I bring before your eyes the suffering of the poor man? He considers his finances; he has no gold and never will. He has some clothes and the sort of possessions the poor have, all worth only a few coins. What can he do? He turns his glance at length on his children; by selling them he might put off death. Imagine the struggle between the desperation of hunger and the bonds of parenthood. The former threatens him with horrible death; nature pulls him back, persuading him to die with his children. Often he starts to do it; each time he stops himself. Finally he is overcome, conquered by necessity and inexorable need. What then are his thoughts? Which one shall I sell first? Which one will the grain auctioneer favor the most? Should I start with the oldest? But I am reluctant to do so because of his age. The youngest? I pity his youth and inexperience of life. That one is the spitting image of his parents. This one is so quick to learn. What horrible misery.³

² Wilken, Robert Louis (2012-11-27). *The First Thousand Years* (pp. 155-156). Yale University Press. Kindle Edition.

³ Ibid, page 156.

Robert Wilken reports that historian Peter Brown goes so far as to say that Christian bishops “invented” the poor — not the poor themselves, but the idea of “the poor” as a kind of holy category of life. Wilken says writes this:

For the notion that the “poor” made a claim on the community as a whole was unknown in the ancient world. In Greece and Rome there was a long tradition of public giving by prominent citizens, and cities relied on the benefactions of the wealthy to construct civic building and adorn streets and places of assembly. The ostentatious munificence of benefactors was displayed in the architectural and artistic beauty of their city, bringing honor on themselves and renown among neighboring cities. The poor were invisible, and a civic screen shielded citizens from the destitute lives of the impoverished living in their midst.⁴

But the early Christians did not hide from the poor, but rather took them to be a kind of holy order of people deserving of ministry.

Likewise with the sick. The early Christians learned a lot about healing the sick from the infirmaries connected with the monastic houses. I imagine this to be like the Brother Cadfael stories, in which Cadfael is learned in herbs and their medicinal properties. But in the fourth century, Saint Basil went beyond the monastic infirmary to establish a public hospital, where the sick were treated by trained physicians schooled in the arts of medicine. Some ancient people were suspicious of medicine. Maybe they preferred praying to the Greek god Asclepius. But these early Christians were not superstitious about disease. They dove right into the science of medicine, and they treated people, including the poor at no charge. “Go, and do thou likewise.”

HIS MASTER’S VOICE

When I was a boy, there was a record label company called “RCA-Victor.” It was the successor company to a company called “HMV” records. HMV is an abbreviation for the logo for that company. HMV stands for “His Master’s Voice.” The records bore this wonderful image of a dog listening to a wind-up gramophone.

Well, that’s we Christians should be like. That’s what little Ephraim, who is about to be baptized, should be like. We should be people who listen to our

⁴ Ibid, pages 156-57.

Master's voice. That what Christians do: we listen for the voice of our Good Shepherd:

³To him the gatekeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. ⁵A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." (John 10:3-5, RSV)

²⁷My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: (John 10:27, KJV)

Well, if we listen for our Master's voice in today's Bible story, we will hear him say to you, to me, "Go, and do thou likewise."

The resurrection of Jesus means that we should dive in to good deeds like the Good Samaritan. The resurrection of Jesus means that it will all turn out all right in the end. No one remembers the priest who walked by, nor the Levite. But we do remember this Good Samaritan. So, let us heed the final words of our reading, "Go, and do likewise," for these words are spoken to us by the One who followed them above all others, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.