

“The C Word”
A Sermon Preached at Knox United Church (Parksville, B.C.)
on July 11th 2010 (Seventh Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Luke 10: 25-37

The final episode—the final episode of the hugely popular American sit-com, *Seinfeld*—that final episode featured a story-line in which our heroes...

...Kramer, Elaine, Jerry & George...

...that final episode featured a story-line in which our heroes found themselves in a small airport in the small town of Latham, Massachusetts. Killing time in the airport, while their plane is being repaired, the four witness a significantly overweight man having his car stolen at gun-point. Rather than intervene, they crack jokes about his weight, film the episode on their camcorder, and then walk away. Later in the episode, when the man reports the carjacking to the police, he also mentions the antics of Jerry and friends. Unbeknownst to them, a recently enacted “duty to rescue” law—a *duty to rescue* law—makes it clear that their conduct is not merely immoral but also criminal. The four friends are arrested, and a trial ensues that sees them punished for their failure to obey the law: their failure to act on their “duty to rescue.”

Ah, yes! “Duty to rescue” laws! If only it were that easy...that easy to get human beings to do the right thing: if it were only a matter of passing just the right law.

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In the early morning of hours of March 13th, 1964, a man by the name of Winston Moseley awoke from a restless sleep, and decided that he was in the mood to find a woman to kill. At 3:15 that morning—in the Kew Gardens section of Queens, New York—Moseley came upon a young woman returning home from work, a young woman whose name will be familiar to many of you: a young woman by the name of Kitty Genovese. Suffice it to say that Moseley not only murdered but brutalized that young woman; suffice it to say that the Kitty Genovese case (as it came to be known) produced a wave of outrage and soul-searching that may well have begun in New York City, but that quickly spread far beyond its confines. As the *New York Times* reported in a shocking article two weeks after Genovese’s gruesome murder, as many as 38 of her neighbours were aware that someone was in trouble outside their apartment building, but only one of them actually got involved in an even minimal way. While later reports challenged that journalist’s figure (it appears that there were roughly a dozen, not 38, witnesses to the episode), the phenomenon that was brought to light through Genovese’s murder is a far from isolated one. Which phenomenon? That of the passive bystander: the one who witnesses a fellow human being in trouble, but fails even to lift a finger.

Not surprisingly, the response to the unseemly revelations that came to light in the aftermath of Genovese’s death, tended to focus on the heartlessness of the big city and of its residents. A young woman brutally murdered...and no one seemed to care...

...care...a “c” word if ever there was one...

...no one seemed to care enough to get involved. Self-absorbed New Yorkers: what else do you expect? Self-absorbed human beings: why does any of this come as a surprise?

Nor should it come as much of a surprise that our standard way of thinking about this morning’s parable...the parable of the Good Samaritan...is to place it in a similar framework: the “why doesn’t anyone care?” framework. And so Jesus here tells a truly timeless story: one that might be better heard in our day-and-age as the one about “the Priest, the Rabbi and the village atheist”. Have you heard it? One day a Priest, while walking down the road, saw a seemingly lifeless body by the side of the road, looked at his watch, straightened his Roman collar, pretended not to have noticed, and walked on down the road! A short while later a Rabbi came along, also saw the body, looked at his watch—straightened his tie—pretended not to notice, and walked on down the road. Soon after that, the village atheist appeared; he was wearing neither a tie nor a collar, but he did notice the body, immediately stopped in his tracks, and took care...took care to see that the man was restored to health. Just as the Samaritan (in the world of Jesus) was a religious outsider who did the right thing, so in our retelling of the story the Village Atheist plays the role of the outsider who did the right thing. And so, as an answer to the question that prompted Jesus to tell the story of the Good Samaritan, it’s the Samaritan—it’s the village atheist—who turns out to be the good neighbour to the man who had fallen into the hands of the bandits. The Rabbi and the Priest appear not to have cared about the man; the Village Atheist (despite the unorthodoxy of his beliefs) cared enough to do the right thing. If only more people cared...if only more people cared enough to make a difference. End of sermon. Then again...maybe not!

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The case of Kitty Genovese (alas there have been other such cases over the years)...

...the case of Ktty Genovese gave birth to more than soul-searching, breast-beating and hand-wringing. In the aftermath of the *New York Times* article that exposed the apparent indifference of Genovese’s neighbours, social psychologists began to devise some intriguing experiments. They sought to explore, and to better understand, the ways in which people respond (or fail to respond) when they are confronted with situations of danger and uncertainty such as the one that confronted Kitty Genovese’s neighbours 46 years ago. Here’s one of the odd things they discovered.

We tend to think that there is safety in numbers. Guess again! It seems that a large number of onlookers decreases rather than increases the likelihood that someone will step forward and assist a person in trouble. Why is that? Well: in the first place, it’s obvious that others aren’t getting involved; perhaps I’m misreading the situation and it’s inappropriate for me to intervene. Also: I have no expertise in medicine or crime fighting or comforting the injured; maybe I’ll mess things up and make the situation worse. Also: if I step forward to help, all of these other people will be staring not only at the victim,

but they'll be staring at me! Judging the effectiveness of my response, watching as to whether or not I know what I'm doing. And so each member of that crowd of onlookers stands back...stands back not because they don't care, but because they aren't certain how best to manifest their care; not because they are unconcerned, (here comes another "c" word) but because they aren't sure if they will be able to manifest their concern in a way that will actually help the victim. In effect they talk themselves out of offering help!

Think about that! All of those reasons for not getting involved—all of the things that social psychologists discovered when they dug a little more deeply—have to do not with "concern" (or lack thereof) and not with "caring" (or lack thereof). Oh yes: there are people who don't give a damn about others. You've met them; so have I. Most of them are just plain selfish; a handful may well be sociopaths. Based on my experience, however, they are few and far between. And yes, from where I stand the reason more people don't get involved (either when they are part of a crowd or when they are solitary witnesses to a wrong)...the reason more people don't get involved, has to do not with their lack of care, not with their lack of concern, but with a far more basic factor. A lack of courage...a lack of courage! Because more often than not it is fear of the unknown...fear of uncertainty...fear about our personal safety and yes...more often than not...

...fear grounded in our lack of confidence in ourselves(!) that keeps us walking down the road...that causes us to avert our eyes...to look the other way...to ignore the sufferer. Indifference, more often than not, isn't the enemy. Lack of compassion is not the enemy. Fear is the enemy. Fear...to which the only real antidote, for which the only real answer...is the "c" word I have in mind, this morning! Courage. Which comes from the Latin for "heart". Cor! Courage! And if you don't think "courage" is at the very heart of this entire business, ask yourself!

What is it that has prompted so many jurisdictions to pass so-called "Good Samaritan laws?" Do you know what a Good Samaritan law is? It's not the same thing as "duty to rescue" laws which try to prod people into involvement. No, a "Good Samaritan Law" is, frankly, much sadder. It's a law that prevents someone who intervenes in a difficult situation—but in the process makes some sort of error that causes harm—it's a law that prevents that person from being sued! If you think it doesn't take courage...if you think it doesn't take courage to get involved in a madhouse world such as this one, think again.

Ponder! Ponder, one further time, the question that prompts Jesus to tell the Parable of the Good Samaritan. It's a question that comes from the lips of a lawyer: "who is my neighbour?" But while it's a lawyer who does the asking, it's a question to which none of us is entirely a stranger. You see: having conceded that "love of neighbour" is the heart of anything that even vaguely deserves to pass as genuine religion, as genuine spirituality, that lawyer's question attempts to provide some boundaries to what, otherwise, would seem to be a terrifyingly boundless commandment. "Fine: I'll love my neighbour! But please tell me how I figure out who does and who does not count as a neighbour". To which Jesus responds by telling a

story... a story which, in effect, throws the question right back in our faces. “Who is my neighbour?” “Well, who are you willing to turn *into* a neighbour? Which boundaries do you have the courage to transgress, in order to find a neighbour, in order to discover a neighbour where previously there had been only a stranger? Having been invited, you see, to define for us a boundary, our Lord manages to dispense with all such niceties; having been invited to place limits around our obligation to reach out to others, Jesus (in terrifying fashion) instead invites us to test our mettle, to challenge our limits, to go as far as our hearts—as far as our courage—is prepared to take us. And yeah, I know...that’s scary, isn’t it?

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Two final thoughts to share.

I am aware of the strange fact that this sermon marks, for me, my first sermon at the start of what is (believe it or not) my 18th year of ministry in this place. (How do 18 years vanish in a heartbeat?) Those 18 years have seen so many changes...not just in the life of this congregation...not merely in the life of our still rapidly expanding Oceanside community...but in a North American culture that presents ever new challenges to those who hope to reach out to others with the good news of the Gospel. I’m reminded, this morning, that “courage” is not merely an “individual” virtue, a personal quality; it’s also a quality that can mark the life of an entire community. And my hunch...my hunch is that congregations in the mainline Protestant tradition (a tradition which, in my humble opinion, still has something distinctive and valuable to offer to others)...my hunch is that congregations and (yes!) whole denominations will require courage (among a handful of other necessary virtues) if we are to continue to play a role in the life of God’s good creation. Courage...including the courage that comes from believing that we do, in fact, have a treasure, albeit one that we most certainly store in earthen vessels! That’s my first bonus thought for the morning. Here’s the other one.

As I have pointed out on at least one previous occasion, ancient Christian writers were accustomed to interpret the Parable of the Good Samaritan in a way that we are likely to find a trifle odd. For these ancient writers, the parable was an allegory: an allegory of the myriad ways in which God-in-Christ cares for us. In other words: *Jesus* is the Good Samaritan: accept no substitute. Jesus is the one that finds us wounded in the muck and the mire, the one who carries us to a place of shelter and safety, the one who nourishes us with good and healing gifts, the one who makes sure that all of our provisions are paid for well in advance. And yes, I know, I know: many of us will find that way of “hearing” the parable quaint, at best, profoundly misleading, at worst. Misleading, in that it seems to get us off the hook (in terms of our personal response to the suffering of others) by singing a sweet lullaby about all the good things God does for us. And yet....and yet.

The longer I live, the more convinced I become that life can be rightly understood only when it is regarded as one long opportunity to learn the ways of love, the problem being that true love requires true courage. And how do we ever learn to live

courageously, if we regard the world as an essentially hostile, alien place? How do we ever learn to risk, to chance, to dare, if every misstep is regarded as a potentially terminal misstep? How better to learn courage than to recognize it in Christ? How better to learn to dare, than to realize that love surrounds us on every side: that even our failures—that even our failures!-- are part of a journey that leads *from love to love*? All of life a journey: from love to love.

Like a lover's caress your spirit revives us;
like a song of the soul you come to be with us;
like a prayer of the heart you heal and restore us,
renewing our spirits, the future to face. ⁱ

The future to face...courageously! And in the name of Jesus! Amen!!

ⁱ John Oldham

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