

Sermon for Proper 10 C—Mufflers and Samaritans  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Wareham  
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The Rev. M. Lise Hildebrandt

On Wednesday, after my sister and her husband had visited for a week, I drove them over to Bourne to catch the bus to Logan Airport, and then returned to work. A short time later, I got a message on my cell phone from Lou: Sarah had apparently left her purse in my car, but not to worry, they would try to talk their way onto the plane, even though she didn't have any ID with her. At Logan! I called him right back and said, the only way Sarah's going to be allowed on that plane is if I bring her purse to the airport. So I rearranged some meetings, put some gas in the car, and headed to Boston.

Partway there, my car started sounding very loud. OK, I thought, my muffler's blown a hole, and I kept driving. Handed off the purse to my sis and headed back. The car was very loud and was also driving a bit rough. I checked to make sure it had acceptable levels of bodily fluids—it was a very hot day—and drove back to church. The next day, after work, I stopped in to my mechanic and asked if he could replace my muffler on Friday, my day off. No problem. Then I put my cello in my car and drove over to Barnstable for my music lesson.

The car was very loud, and it was running kind of rough, but it was working. After a while, though, I noticed that in addition to the loud putt-putt-putt and plout-plout-plout of the engine, there was another sound. A klunk-kla-klunk sound. Hmm. First rule of driving: ignore scary sounds. It got louder. Second rule of driving: try to get to your destination before dealing with scary sounds. I was almost there—just one more mile to go. KLUNK KLUNK KLUNK!! Third rule—if all else fails, pull over. I pulled over, got out and looked. My muffler had fallen off. Almost. One end was still attached to the car by a rubber bracket thingy. That wasn't so bad—just had to pull it the rest of the way off, throw it in the trunk, and I was good to go.

The only problem was, I couldn't get it off. I pulled and pushed and twisted, and nothing worked. I was getting dirty and sweaty and late for my lesson, and I just couldn't get the darned thing free. I rummaged around in my car to see if I had a knife or sharp object. Nothing. Along about now, I was wishing that some kind person would offer to help, but despite heavy traffic on the Mid-Cape, they all just whizzed by at 65 mph. I wondered at that. Here I was in nice clothes, halfway under the car, wrestling with the muffler—what did they think? That I was having fun here? Alas, no Good Samaritan.

“Good Samaritan” has come to mean a kind person who stops to help someone in need. We forget that the original name was filled with irony. Jesus told the story of the “Good Samaritan” after a Jewish lawyer, a religious man who interpreted Jewish law for the people, asked Jesus how to gain eternal life. Jesus turns the question back to the lawyer—“What does the law say? How do you interpret it?”—and the lawyer comes up with a brilliant summary: “Love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” “Great!” says Jesus. “Do that, and you will live.” But lawyers want exact definitions, and this lawyer asked, “Who then is my neighbor?” Whom exactly do I have to love?

That's when Jesus tells the story, about the man who was robbed, beaten, and left for dead. You only get the impact of the story when you understand that Jews and Samaritans despised each other. Each claimed to be true followers of Abraham and each saw the other as lowly vermin. Put in modern terms, a person was robbed, beaten, and left for dead along the side of the road in Wareham. An Episcopal priest drove right on by; the town selectman crossed over to the other side and kept going;

but it was the crack addict or right-wing militia extremist or Muslim jihadist who stopped for the injured person, called 911, accompanied the ambulance to Tobey Hospital, and offered to pay for the bill. So “Good Samaritan” to Jewish ears would be like saying “Good Crack Addict,” “Good Militia Extremist” or “Good Muslim Jihadist.”

Jesus himself never called the Samaritan “good.” But the point was that it was the least “expected” person who had in fact acted as neighbor to the injured man. “Neighbor” was not identified by appearance or quality of the object—“How do I identify my neighbor?”—but identified by the quality of the subject—“How do I **act** as a neighbor to others?” “Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of thieves?” Jesus asked. “The one who showed him mercy,” answered the lawyer. “Go and do likewise.”

OK. So, love God, and act with mercy towards others. But why should this give you eternal life? Granted, God is in charge of life and time, so the love God part makes sense. But why should acting mercifully give you eternal life?

Standing on the Mid-Cape highway, feeling a little helpless with the stubborn muffler, I was trying to think what to do next when a car pulled over. A man got out, after admitting that he was a bit scared of the high-speed traffic next to us. I explained the situation—that I really just needed help getting the muffler off—and he proceeded to wrestle with the muffler. After a few minutes, he worked it off. We put it in the trunk, I thanked him profusely, and we each went on our way.

We tend to think of “eternal life” as something far off in heaven, after we die. But this parable points up that eternal life is about what we do now in this life. Things that we do and experience now can either increase life or diminish life. We have that choice every day. And the things that increase mercy, joy, and gratitude are particularly life-giving.

As I drove off to my lesson, I was filled with gratitude to this stranger. I could have called for a tow through my car insurance; I wasn’t without a backup plan. But what I needed was really very simple. Someone to help me. Didn’t take more than 5 minutes. In addition to the act itself was the sense of human connection. I am newly single and this is one of those situations where you feel it. Wow, I’m really alone! The man who stopped increased the amount of mercy, kindness, and human connection in the world, and I was grateful. Despite being alone, I was OK.

But I suspect that the story doesn’t end there. Jesus said to the lawyer, “Go and do likewise; love God and neighbor and **you** will live.” Acting as a Good Samaritan or Good Whatever has an effect on the doer, not just the recipient. These acts of mercy expand the life of the doer. These opportunities allow us to get out of our safe little life and do something for someone else, someone we may never see again or never otherwise come in contact with. The man who stopped was tanned and well-groomed, like someone used to living a life of power and money. He took a risk, stopping on a busy highway. What he did was not a big deal, but he probably doesn’t do that often. Perhaps he also was able to drive away a little lighter, a little happier, because he had done something kind.

A mature life in God is one that is filled with gratitude. It is important to cultivate a heart of gratitude for the times when we are helped, recognizing and thanking God for mercy and assistance. But it is also important to cultivate a heart of gratitude when we have the opportunity to reach out to others. I remember when I have been helped, but I also remember and cherish the times I have been able to lend a hand or a prayer or an ear to someone in need. When I have had the opportunity to connect to

another human being in a profound way, even if only for a few moments. That increases my life and increases life around me.

A few years ago, my daughters went with their youth group on a summer mission trip with Youthworks, a national organization. You think of mission trips going to exotic places like Haiti or Africa; this mission trip was to Lynn, MA. One of the students reflected on her experience:

I'm not sure exactly what I was expecting prior to the Youth Works trip. I had vague notions of "Helping people" and "Making a difference." Well, we did help people.

But what I remember most vividly are the people who may or may not remember me. Men and women from Spectrum, a day center for clients with Alzheimer's or dementia, like Mario, an artist who never went anywhere without his sister Mary, or Larry, a 48 year old with Alzheimer's who had a passion for dancing . . . or Fred/Dynamite, an engineer and bomber pilot, or Foxy Lady, who enjoyed loudly chatting about her neighbors.

It was hard going there at first . . . And it was difficult to play Sorry with people who forgot how to play at every turn. And to meet someone for the seventh time because they didn't realize that they had already introduced themselves . . . On the Youth Works trip I met people I never expected to meet and learned more about God than if I were to have stayed home that week and read the Bible over twice.

Inspired by our journey to Lynn, I have recently gotten involved with a similar day center in Waltham and hope to be going there often. If I did not make a difference in the lives of the people at Spectrum, I think I can say that they certainly made a difference in mine. (Karin)

We are **invited**, not commanded, into abundant life when we take advantage of the opportunities to give and be merciful. To go outside our comfort zone. To connect with people we might not otherwise encounter.

These experiences should lead us to a place of gratitude. If they don't, you probably need to go home and take care of yourself, because you are overextended. Love God and love your neighbor—both are places to experience mercy and gratitude.

Let us pray. Amen.