

Pentecost 5, July 10, 2022 (Lk 10:25-37; Col 1:1-14; Dt 30:8-14; Ps 25:1-10)

The Merciful Muslim

A salesman went to Detroit. He represented a company that made caskets and embalming supplies for funeral homes. Everyone needs those services some time, so his visits took him all over: to upscale neighborhoods, small towns, and inner city slums—wherever there was a funeral home. He worked with people of every color, language, and background. This day, a Friday, his last stop was at a funeral parlor in inner city Detroit. It was a rough area, where even the police didn't go without backup. Maybe because of that, the funeral business was booming. This day, though, he couldn't get to the home. A large conference at the big Catholic Church downtown had closed several streets, and he had to park three blocks away.

As he was walking, he got mugged. A teenage gang surrounded him and forced him into an alley, where they took his wallet and his sample case. Then one said he liked the salesman's overcoat, so he took that too. When they told the salesman to take off his shoes, he started to run. One jittery youth lashed out with his knife. As the teens ran away, the salesman sank to his knees, clutching his stomach. He managed to crawl out of the alley to the main road, where he collapsed in a heap on the sidewalk.

A few minutes later, an ELCA pastor came down that sidewalk. She was serving on the Bishop's staff and was reviewing an important speech she'd be giving that evening. Her mind was filled with words and ideas about a new mission plan they were introducing to clean up the streets of Detroit. Her attention was caught by an overflowing trash can, and it struck her that there weren't any designated receptacles for recycling. Concentrating on how she could work that into her speech, she almost tripped over a man lying on the sidewalk. She muttered a quick "Excuse me" and sidestepped just in time to avoid trampling the sleeping man.

A few minutes later, along came another ELCA pastor who was heading for the same important meeting. He was planning to argue against the new program to clean up the slums. He believed the ELCA had more important work to do, like evangelizing the crowded cities in Africa and building churches in South America. His mind was so far removed from the slum he was in that he literally passed by the wounded man without noticing him. Only as he stepped beyond the motionless heap on the sidewalk did he realize it was a human being. Assuming it was either a drunkard or a drug abuser, he hurried on to his meeting.

Three blocks away a young Muslim college student got into his car. He had been to Friday prayers at the mosque. Prayers had finished a couple of hours earlier, but some sort of convention at the big Christian church down the road had clogged traffic and blocked off streets, so he had just gone inside to pray quietly until the roads were clear. Finally it looked as if he could get home, so he got in his car and pulled into traffic. A minute later, though, he saw from the corner of his eye a shapeless bundle on the sidewalk. It was a man, lying in the cold without even a coat. The student pulled up to the curb and looked around warily.

He had to be careful. He had been born in Detroit, but his parents were from Laos, and was obviously of Asian descent. In the current climate, those who looked like him just needed to be careful in unfamiliar neighborhoods. Although his people had been leading quiet and productive lives here for decades, they were rejected by many Americans. But the street was nearly empty, so he got out of his car and went to check on the man.

“Sir, are you all right?” It was a dumb question, he knew, but what else was he to say? The man didn’t answer, so the student knelt beside him. Only then did he see a dark stain on the sidewalk beneath the man’s stomach. It was blood. The student immediately pulled out his phone and called 911, begging them to hurry. When he rolled the man over, the wound in his stomach began to bleed more profusely. The student was in his first year of medical school, and he knew he had to apply pressure. Blood covered his hands, but he held them in place until the paramedics arrived.

The student followed the ambulance to the ER, where he told the doctors everything he knew, then sat in the waiting room, unsure what to do. After a while, one of the nurses came and asked him if he were a friend of the man. She told him the man had no ID.

“I’d never seen him before I found him,” the student said, “I’m sorry, I don’t know who he is. Is there . . . anything I can do?” The nurse said the man was in surgery now. The student nodded, then took a sheet of paper and wrote down his name and contact information. “Look, until you find out who he is and find his family, I can be his contact. When he’s out of surgery, could you call me? I’ll be back to see him tomorrow, but call any time, even in the middle of the night, if you need anything, all right?”

Wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus asked him, “Which of the three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The lawyer said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Note: this sermon and the title are based on a sermon preached by Pastor Jerry Morris, formerly of First United Methodist Church in Wausau, on July 3, 2016.