



Rev. Chris Taylor - 7.14.19

"Called to Compassion"

Psalm 82 and Luke 10:25-37

We have come to take a rather casual attitude towards the guidance we find in Scripture. It has become increasingly common, for example, to treat God's call to honor the Sabbath as an anachronism – a holdover from a bygone era, unrealistic and naïve. This is one of the Ten Commandments, a call that goes all the way back to creation itself. Yet today we tend to treat Sundays as just the second half of a two-day weekend; a day to relax, a day to get our chores done. The very definition of regular attender has shifted from every Sunday twenty or thirty years ago, to one or two Sundays a month today.

Who do you think gets hurt when we do that? Do you think the guidance we find here is arbitrary – that God is looking for obedience simply for obedience's sake? The thing we need to understand is that this guidance is offered for our sake.

It isn't God who gets hurt when we ignore it. It is us. The consequences might not be as immediate, but it is not a whole lot different than ignoring stop signs or traffic lights while on a drive. We might get away with it for a while, but ultimately we are the ones who pay the price.

God offers this guidance for our sake. God created us. God knows us best, and with this guidance God is showing us how to find the very best kind of life. This is what the lawyer was getting at in our text, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" He was talking about life with God; life in the Kingdom; life as God intended it to be lived. He already knew the answer – the two greats of Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:5 "Love the You're your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind," and Leviticus 19:18 "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Well then, who is this neighbor that I'm supposed to love? And we all know Jesus' answer, offered in his parable of the good Samaritan: our neighbor is anyone in need.

Years ago I came across the story of a woman who fell off a dock in a marina. It isn't hard to do; a moment's inattention is all it takes. Unfortunately, like just over half of all Americans according to a Red Cross survey, she couldn't swim. Nearby, observing it all, was a young man lounging on his yacht. It turns out he was an excellent swimmer, but instead of helping the woman, he just sat there and watched. He didn't really care what happened to her. She wasn't his responsibility. And so he did nothing, and ultimately she drowned.

From a purely legal perspective that young man was right. It's what people down in Cocoa Florida found out just over a year ago when five teenagers stood nearby and did nothing when a 31 year old man fell into a pond near his home. As he drowned they laughed and taunted him. They recorded his final moments and afterwards posted their video to YouTube.

The Cocoa Police Department wanted to charge them with failure to report a death, but the state attorney's office announced they wouldn't be charged because there were no laws requiring them to provide assistance. The legislature had actually considered a Good Samaritan law but like most communities had chosen to reject it. Does the fact that there are no laws against it mean that it's okay for us to do absolutely nothing in the face of great need?

It might not be legally wrong, but that's not the same as wrong for our psyche or wrong for our soul. When Scripture calls us to love others it is not just because that makes for a nicer and more pleasant world. No, God calls us to love because there is some essential part of who we are that shrinks and dies when we ignore it – that part of us that bears the image of our Creator.

That young man on his yacht might have been raised amid extraordinary privilege, might have been feeling very safe and smug as he sat in the sun and watched a woman drown, but what a pathetic human being; what a small and insignificant and empty life to be living. He, like those five teenagers, was missing

everything that gives our lives substance; everything that invests our lives with weight and meaning.

I grew up hearing the sound of planes moving along the Potomac River into and out of what was then called National Airport in Washington, D.C. It was a part of the background of my life, much like the sound of cicadas on summer evenings.

It was a shock, then, at a number of different levels when one of those planes crashed on a blustery winter afternoon in January of 1982. Coming out of National it failed to gain altitude as it took off, and crashed into the 14th St. Bridge before plummeting into the river just beyond.

The Air Florida flight was carrying 74 passengers and five crewmembers. In the moments immediately following the accident, six people were able to make it out of the wreckage, but ultimately just five survived – each of them towed to safety by a park police helicopter that had made it to the scene and dropped a line.

One account stood out. It was the story about the sixth passenger, the one who didn't make it. He had been one of the first to emerge from the wreckage; one of the first to have the chance to be towed to safety. Here is how the Washington Post described it the next day:

He was about 50 years old, one of half a dozen survivors clinging to twisted wreckage bobbing in the icy Potomac when the first helicopter arrived. To the copter's two-man Park Police crew he seemed the most alert. Life vests were dropped, then a flotation ball. The man passed them to the others. On two occasions, the crew recalled last night, he handed away a life line from the hovering machine that could have dragged him to safety. The helicopter crew – who rescued five people, the only persons who survived from the jetliner – lifted a woman to the riverbank, then dragged three more persons across the ice to safety. Then the life line saved a woman who was trying to swim away from the sinking wreckage, and the helicopter pilot, Donald W. Usher, returned to the scene, but the man was gone.

It took a while but they were finally able to identify who he was. His name was Arland Williams, Jr. He was born and raised in Mattoon, Illinois, and after high school had gone on to attend The Citadel down in South Carolina. Following his graduation he served two years in the military and then went into banking, eventually becoming a bank examiner for the Federal Reserve System. He was divorced. He was engaged to be married again. From all accounts, it seems like his was a pretty typical, a pretty ordinary life. And then on a cold, snowy afternoon in January, everything changed.

I think about Arland Williams from time to time. I suspect that his first thought was that he was in better shape than the others, that they needed help more than he did. But at some point he must have realized that he was fading. At some point he must have known that passing that rope again meant he probably wasn't going to make it. But he did it. He passed it that second time and watched as still another passenger was pulled to safety, and then his arms and legs finally gave out in the freezing waters and he slipped under.

I think that young man on his yacht would have called Arland Williams a loser for choosing to make that sacrifice for people he didn't even know. I think that's what those five teenagers down in Florida would have said. Only a loser gives up something for someone else. Only a loser would give away their money, or their time and energy, or their very life instead of putting themselves first.

What does it mean to you that Jesus lived a life so fundamentally contrary to that kind of thinking; a life so diametrically opposed to much of what this world values? Did Jesus get it right or didn't he? Maybe this call to compassion, this call to love our neighbor, isn't just a sometime thing. Maybe it holds the key to the best kind of life of all.