

"Living without Loopholes"

Luke 10:25-37

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A sermon preached by Rev. Julia A. Carlson

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

Saint Paul, Minnesota

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Last month, I was in Latvia with the Choir School. You may have heard a bit about it from Sofia two Sundays ago in worship and there will be a presentation in the fall to share much more with you. One thing I highlight this morning is a visit to their National Occupation Museum. It was of monumental importance to our guide that we get an understanding of their experience and the young docent at the museum spoke passionately for over an hour about their political past.

We'd already learned from the pastor in Aizpute, that they were a tribal people, in touch with the land but without an alphabet or unified language even when the rest of Europe had advanced. Their capital was founded by the Germans in the thirteenth century; the Swedes established a peace in the Baltic region in the seventeenth century and from there Latvia was part of either Sweden or Russia, still trying to hold onto their tribal identity and finally winning their independence in 1920.

This was the part of their history that I did not know and found the most heart wrenching; I didn't know they had that taste of freedom before the Soviets moved into Latvia in 1940, as World War II was getting underway. In 1941, the Nazi's displaced the Soviets, at first welcomed by the Latvians as a liberating force, until reality of fascism became apparent. And of course, after the war, the world's politicians divided the land and peoples and they officially became an SSR.

Having been a part of the USSR throughout most of my lifetime, I never thought about their history or their freedom. But we were a part of their hopes; because of a treaty in place before the Second World War, the people of Latvia expected the United States and our allies to come and liberate them.

Here in the west, their hopes for political negotiations or an armed liberation feels like an irrational expectation – yet from what one knows of the human heart and its yearning for freedom and living into an identity of integrity, it was, of course, a life-giving hope. So it was equally important to our guide that we went to the town square that same evening with flowers and oak leaves on our heads to celebrate mid-summer, and join with hundreds of Latvians in singing national folk songs. They are moving ahead and yet still mourn the loss of thousands of leaders and intellectuals murdered by the Soviets, the thousands who immigrated to other places in the world when they lost their livelihood, and the decades of economic and structural decay.

I start here with these new insights from Latvia because this is how I know that the people gathering at our southern border are there for more reasons than we can know. This is how I have come to understand that our country and our actions, past, present, and future, carry far more meaning and expectation around the world than we can probably account for. There are hopes and dreams for life here we cannot legitimately control nor keep to ourselves – and in this way we might even say that the Holy Spirit may be in the lead.

In our scriptures today, a young lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to gain eternal life and Jesus treats the opportunity as an oral exam on the Torah. The lawyer quotes a portion of the Shema and Jesus affirms his answer. At this point, the young lawyer could have just walked away a happy man. But he didn't. It seems he wanted even more satisfaction, even more praise, and more recognition of his righteousness. It's a kind of holier-than-thou moment – but the thou he engaged and wanted to be holier than was Jesus. I get kind of huffy about that but then I realize we human beings do this with some regularity.

Lord, we love you, heart, mind, soul and strength – please, Holy One, remember all that we have done to please you. We do. And then, we ask, "who is my neighbor," expecting that divine pat on the back for having done so much good. Because surely, we are not responsible for the naïve expectations of freedom from strangers in another country or hemisphere.

I did not expect to find my neighbor was the Latvian whose spirit was being broken by the Soviets – but think about it, a man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho and he was beaten and robbed. His helper was a Samaritan – this is a certainly multi-tribal, multi-cultural, and multi-religious story, a national story, about willingness to care for the stranger and the foreigner.

For a lot of years, we have given the priest and the Levite – the insiders in the faith – an out – when they crossed to the other side of the road; pastors have preached this with compassion for their inability to touch the dead because to do so would make them ritually unclean but, our neighbor at Luther Seminary, New Testament scholar Matt Skinner closes that loophole with these words, “The injured man in the parable is a Jew, as suggested by the wider narrative context and the setting in which his attack occurs. Jesus does not explain why the priest and Levite – highly esteemed Jewish religious figures associated with the Jerusalem temple – neglect to assist one of their own people. The parable treats their staying across the road from a fellow Jew in need as a shocking event. Nothing indicates that they think the victim is dead or that they fear contracting contamination from a corpse; even if the man were dead, such purity concerns would be insignificant compared to the weightier need to arrange for the burial of an exposed body. The point is that two people who presumably represent the identity and piety of the victim do not express any concern toward him and remain unwilling to assume the risks that come with pausing in a dangerous place. The two act in identical ways: each arrives, sees the man, and passes by on the other side. Nothing can excuse their refusal to reach out” (Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3, 241).

There is a way in which this scripture may teach us not to ask about neighbors – to act the pretense of humility – but this young lawyer exists to nuzzle at that part of us that feels we’ve done good things and can now rest and then repeat. But the world is changing almost faster than we can comprehend and we must ask anew.

We are now a global community that Jesus anticipated; he knew about two world wars, Vietnam and other conflicts, and dictatorships that have unraveled the world’s social fabric; and he knew about Sunday soccer, Steve Jobs, Silicon Valley, the stock market and multi-national corporations that have changed and expanded our neighborhood. So, we must keep asking, “Who is my neighbor?”

In 2018, 68.5 million people were counted as displaced or as refugees due to violence, war, famine, and global warming. We have had a hand in creating some of the problems that plague lives in many parts of the world including Central and South America. I go back to Skinner’s words, “The point is that two people who presumably represent the identity and piety of the victim do not express any concern toward him and remain unwilling to assume the risks that come with pausing in a dangerous place.” When children are separated from their parents, Dr. Charles Nelson of Harvard Medical School says, they experience a rush of stress hormones that “start killing off little branches of brain cells that transmit messages” – the body’s response is to try to numb the pain. Over time, stress can “kill off neurons and do long-term psychological damage.” Nelson calls this “emotional shrapnel.” (Article in the Washington Post, posted 6/18/2019, accessed 7/10/2019).

To pause, first means, we cannot look away. Then as practitioners of this Christian faith we engage locally as well as nationally and internationally, and to do this long enough to make systemic change for the good for our neighbors and for ourselves. As Romanian-born, American Jewish author, professor, political activist, Nobel Laureate, and Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel wrote, “Always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.” Multiple agencies within the PCUSA are working all paths of advocacy in Washington DC, and reaching out at the border to bring the message of hope and freedom because, in the words of J. Herbert Nelson, that is “the accountability of the gospel.”

For me, the accountability of the gospel and the emotional shrapnel connects the geography and several generations. The young adults in Latvia are healing from their wounds through new business opportunities, by forming art cooperatives, using electronic communication, finding ways to strengthen their community and life together and encouraging American visitors to retire there. But as a whole, we found the Latvians to be a somber people – there is a remnant, low-level awareness of the political system that had them in its grip and one that we Americans have always feared. We have an aversion to being in dangerous places and this frankly contributes to the world becoming a more dangerous place. It was important that we named and faced that.

That the Latvians won their own independence is now their greatest strength – so what if we name our concerns about the foreigner and the immigrant; what if we face our fears, take on our portion of the stress hormones, and stop the cycles of trauma that are collapsing our future. It is our kingdom work as we pause at the crossroads of becoming a more caring world community or taking the route of fear and isolation.

In bringing our Choir School to Latvia, I believe we brought them the best of us. I believe we brought to Latvia and shared with them our young people and children, own greatest hope. In addition to the worship music and planned concerts sung, the Lutheran pastor who showed us several significant sites in Aizpute, asked for a song in return. The same thing happened when we wanted to see a church in the middle of a major restoration project in Circe, and in Riga at the end of an architectural walking tour; whether in the now empty synagogue, that church, or on a street corner, Sofia and the choir quickly organized themselves and sang, *Jubilate Deo* – “our joy is in God, our praise is for God.”

When this is our truth, we will not even wish to look for loopholes, but will love God “with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind;” which means desiring for our neighbors to have all that we have – even at our expense – and with God’s blessings for all. Amen.