

SOMETHING CHRISTIAN FOR A CHANGE

A Sermon Delivered to

The Unitarian Society of Menomonie,

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By Bob Bledsoe, Commissioned Lay Leader

By now, many of us have seen it. The hit and run of 78-year old Angel Torres of Hartford, CN, on May 30 caught on surveillance video. The tape records him looking both ways and crossing the street, and then being struck by two cars swerving across the center line from the right side of the street, the first one clipping him, stopping him from proceeding, the second hitting him head-on, flinging him up and over the roof, to lay prone in the middle of the lane.

It's a disturbing video to watch, and not just for what the television news show that broadcast it terms its "graphic content," because it's less graphic than anything we've seen on CSI, but because of something profoundly more disturbing. Yes, we see both

cars speed up immediately after the accident and shoot down a side street. And yes, then we see any number of other cars slow down, take in the scene, and then slowly drive on. Police estimate ten cars passed him on the road. Watching the tape, you can see a number of cars heading toward him, seeing something in the lane ahead, and scooting off down side streets to avoid it.

Most disturbing, however, is the number of people standing around, watching this happen and then doing—nothing. No one hurt Mr. Torres any further, but no one helped him either. Police now say that at least four 911 calls were made during the minute and a half that Torres lay in the street, but watch the people gingerly approach him, still staying several steps from him, as if he were going to suddenly spring up and bite them, craning their necks to see him in the afternoon glare. Mr. Torres lived—he is paralyzed below his neck and in critical condition—but it does not lend this story a happy ending.

Daryl Roberts, Hartford's police chief, is quoted in several accounts saying, "It's a clear indication of what we have become... We see a man lying in the street who has been hit by a car and people are just driving by, and people around him walk by him... At the end of the day, we have to look at ourselves and understand that our moral values have changed and we have no regard for ourselves."

How can we live in such a world? Well, we always have. Chief Roberts aside, there is no golden age to which someone can point when everyone treated everyone else well and cared for one another. As almost any UU will tell you, we don't need a Satan because we take up that role ourselves pretty handily. The Twentieth Century didn't invent evil behavior, although it refined it some. If anything, the most you could argue is

that behavior like that shown in Hartford has been given an imprimatur, a stamp saying it's all right to behave that way, no one expects you to behave any differently. It's like Lou Reed writes, "You can depend on cruelty/On crudity of thought and sound/You can depend on the worst always happening."

It's been common in the last decade to see people with WWJD bracelets, but there was a period of my life when I could have worn a WWLD bracelet—What would Lou do? That may not have been the smartest thing to do, basing my behavior on the ethics of Lou Reed, although I can say with some certainty I have a better idea what Lou would do in any given situation than what Jesus might. Unfortunately, or fortunately for me at the time perhaps, the answer to WWLD would invariably be to get stoned or drunk, face the fear and propel myself headlong at it. That led to some poor decision-making on my part, but some good stories.

At any rate, we have an answer in this song. Lou doesn't write "You can depend on the worst always happening, so give up." He writes, "You can depend on the worst always happening/You need a busload of faith to get by." Lou doesn't tell you faith in what—that's your deal, although I can tell you from listening to a lot of Lou Reed, what you can have faith in is people's propensity to do the things they do for their own reasons.

The song is a good one, although a lot of critics dismiss it. There's this long list of things you can't depend on—family, friends, intelligence, god—and then the kickoff. The one thing you can depend on is that you'll need, not just faith, but a busload of it. The things you can depend on are the nasty things—murders, rape, hypocrisy, impotent rage—but you need faith to get through them. His most chilling line is "You can't

depend on the goodly-hearted/The goodly-hearted made lampshades and soap,” referring to a practice of some Nazi camp commanders to make those things out of the skin and body fat of their Jewish prisoners. But what’s even more chilling is the notion, equally applicable because Lou has refused to confirm or deny either meaning, that the “goodly-hearted” are the incredible, civilized nation of German intelligentsia. The goodly-hearted made the lampshades and soap. In Lou, even the best can be the worst.

But this is no nihilism. If you can’t depend on any of these things, if you can only depend on evil being done, you still need to live in this world and so far as you can see there are no other worlds, so you have to get by in this one. That’ll take a lot of faith.

Are we capable of such faith? If we could answer “Yes” and be certain that what we had faith in was redemption, then we would be Christian. And because that’s where we started as a faith, that’s what I’m returning to for the rest of this sermon. You’re all familiar with this next story, whether from Bible classes or children’s stories or *Davey and Goliath* episodes. You all know the basics—man gets attacked, guy who isn’t supposed to like the man comes by, picks him up and dusts him off, nurses him back to health. We’re all the same, we can all get along. Kumbayah.

I want to take a deeper look at it, however, and not only because it’s my assignment for this weekend—or not just because of that—but because there’s a hint of what Christianity can be tucked in there.

It’s not often noticed that the story that we all know has a short preamble that sets up some context. Previous to the start of this story, Jesus has chosen out seventy or seventy-two, it’s undetermined, to be his ambassadors and given the wonderful

admonition that, “whenever you enter a town and [its people] do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you,’” and then said some important directions to the disciple, and then this lawyer stands up and says, “Hey, Teacher, I’ve got a question for you.”

Now *lawyer* at this time has a broader meaning than simply someone who argues the law. He also reads scripture and is capable of interpreting it. The thing to remember is there is no absolute interpretation, not at this time and I would argue not now, and there’s a tradition that hearkens back further to encompass the worldly and satisfying practice of arguing out interpretations. Catholic seminarians call it “disputation” and I like that so I’ll call it that too. The lawyer, who is recognized by society as an expert in scripture is recognizing Jesus as a person who’s also got some understanding of scripture and is saying, “What do you think?”

His question is “How do I live forever?” He’s asking both, we suspect, as a matter of theory and practicality, similar to our asking a centenarian “to what do you attribute your long life?” and a theologian “how do I get in on the sweet stuff?” This is a part of the covenant between god and her people: “I’ll make you a great people, bless you, give you some property, and finally you’ll have eternal life with me. But you have to behave.” Jesus, as a good teacher would, answers with a question, because it’s always best to get a good grasp of where the questioner is going before articulating a response. We all know the best thing when someone asks you “What do you think?” is to respond, “Well, what do *you* think?”

It’s not often noted that the lawyer gets the answer “right,” that is, he answers the way Jesus approves. He says, “You shall love the lord your god with all your heart, and

with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus gives him the equivalent of a little punch to the shoulder. “You got it, brother.” But the lawyer, who’s no fool, and who’s really got a question, says, “Yeah, but who’s my neighbor?”

Give him this, it’s a thought-out question: he’s probably living in a nice neighborhood, clean, kept up, keeps the Sabbath regularly, recognizes his neighbors are likely to do so as well, but what about the other people? I mean, come on, not everyone’s like us. There’s these people elsewhere and, let’s face it, they got some problems. Am I responsible for loving them too?

Now we’re at the point of the story we all know: bandits, beatings, priest, Levite, Samaritan, bandaging wounds, “take care of this guy, I’ll pay you back later.” It’s worth noting that neither the priest nor the Levite do anything to hurt the guy further, they just pass him by. One commentator suggests giving them the benefit of the doubt, thinking like many of us do, “This is too much for me. I’m not up to it. I don’t want to be reminded of how ugly the world can be or how vulnerable we are...I don’t want to see the blood and bruises on this man’s face. It will be too hard.” That’s a legitimate response, but it’s a response that does nothing for anyone except ourselves.

Jesus asks, “So which of these dudes, the priest, the Levite or the Samaritan, was responsible to the guy?” The lawyer’s not bad: he says, “The one who took care of him,” and Jesus says, “You are *estudio primo uno*. Go out there and do exactly that.”

That’s a great story. Not just among biblical stories or moral stories but as stories go themselves. It’s got violence, blood, hypocrisy, irony and a happy ending. Admittedly, it’s a little hard to see some of the relevance to our contemporary situation.

“I know I live in the global village, I know everyone’s really my neighbor, I recognize we’re all similar.” So I’m going to tell the story but with a few changes. Since I’m not as good a storyteller as the writer of Luke gospel, I’ve got a little more detail.

Guy’s walking along the Red Cedar Trail and he’s not looking where he’s going and he falls down along one of those spots where the ground is soft and he slides almost to the river. He’s pretty banged up, he thinks, maybe a broken arm, maybe his leg is at an angle a healthy leg oughtn’t to be. He’s laying there a long time. When he wakes up he notices the slope is almost perfectly sheer and even if he could get up, about halfway up the sand breaks away and he’d be right back down at the river, hurt even worse.

Dude comes by. He’s a local teacher. He’s a good man, responsible, keeps his commitments. Guy down by the river’s edge, he sees him, waves one pitiable hand at him, shouts, “Hey, brother, can you help me up out of here?” But the teacher, he’s a jogger and this is his running time. He’s got his headphones on, doesn’t even hear this guy, he’s not looking down, doesn’t see him waving. He goes on past.

Guy’s getting pretty nervous. It’s going to be dark sooner than later and it’s late in the year. This could be bad.

Another dude goes by, local minister. He’s a pretty good person, too—everyone in this town is an okay person. Guy down at the river’s edge waves and says, in a weaker voice, “Hey, pastor, can you help me up out of here?” But the minister, he’s got tomorrow’s sermon due and he’s taking a walk to clear his head. His mind’s full of what he’s going to say and how he’s going to say it and he doesn’t hear the guy either. He just walks on.

Now the guy's getting really worried. It's about quarter to seven and the cold is already creeping up his spine. He might live through the night from his wounds, but he's going to be exposed to hypothermia and if he does have broken limbs he'll probably go into shock and that can be fatal. He cries a little.

One of the local kids comes by. Guy down at the river recognizes him. He used to hang out down by the Acoustic where he sold weed to the college kids. He got picked up by the cops, cleaned out, spent some time in prison, got his act together. He's been out a couple months, has a hard time finding a steady job, the story is he's been turning tricks to live day to day.

Guy down by the river practically whispers up, "Help."

Kid hears him, looks over the edge down at him, yells, "Can you move?"

Guy tests himself out. He can move. It hurts like hell and he's going to have some nasty bruises and a scar, but turns out nothing's broken. He crawls to his feet and says, "Yeah, I can."

Kid slides down the cliff to where the guy is. Guy's thinking, "Oh man, this kid's going to rob me!" He whimpers, "I said get me some help, now we're both stuck down here."

Kid puts his arm around the guy and holds him against himself so the guy can stand and walk. Gingerly, painfully, but he can walk. Kid says, "Yeah, but I've been down here before and I know the way out."

Police Chief Daryl Roberts has said, "People always say 'what are the police doing'. That is not a police problem." But with due respect to Chief Roberts' frustration,

he is only half right. It is a police problem. It is also a minister problem. A doctor problem. A teacher problem. A lawyer problem. A politician problem. A grocery store manager problem. A copier repairman problem, a news reporter problem, a social worker problem, a dog groomer problem, a delivery van driver problem, a dairy farmer problem, a postal employee problem and a falafel vendor problem. In short, it is the problem of every person who has had an influence in the individual life of every individual on that street, and we are all on that street. I'd like to say I'd have at least jumped out into the street and stopped drivers by my presence so he wouldn't be struck again, but I don't know that's what I'd do. Perhaps you do know what you'd do, perhaps you've been in a similar situation and handled it heroically. You might have been Mr. Torres' good Samaritan. If so, you are, as not just this video but a decade's worth of anecdotes and studies seem to tell us, unlike most of us. Most of us are clearly visible in the video, milling around, waiting for someone else to do something.

To Mr. Torres' benefit, someone did stop by—a passing police cruiser happened on the scene. But Mr. Torres sprawled on the street for a minute and a half before they chanced by, and I couldn't guess at how long he might have had to lay there if they had made their appearance two minutes before. He might be dead now rather than paralyzed.

What can we say we can count on? Our inhumanity to other people? Or our willingness to help others when they're down? I can't say. If I could, I'd be god, and much as I might like to think I am, I'm very aware I am at best a very small part. (Which is not to say I'm not god's gift.) But I can say this. We must count on one another. We must have faith in one another. When I see you lying on the street, have faith I will reach

out my hand to help you back up, my fingers locking over your fingers, your palm cradled by mine. I will sit beside you as you're dying so you don't have to die alone.

When we're at our lowest ebb and we're on what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called the "Bloody Pass," we have no idea from what direction that redemption is going to come. It could be from the fundamentalist who offers us shelter or Dick Cheney who says "I'll cover that" when we're 32 cents short. It's a comfort to know this, but that's not the point of the story. We don't need to be the guy down by the river. We already are the guy down by the river often enough. We need to be the screwed up kid. We must be the redemption that the other one can't see coming. Thursday I was walking around Minneapolis and there was an old black guy sitting on an upturned bucket and smacking his palms on another one and singing something he was making up as he went along. He had another bucket with change in it. I went up to him and said, "I don't have any money for you, but you can have my apple," and he blessed me and shook my hand. It had been a busy week, but I felt in that moment like I'd accomplished more than I had all week.