

Very Near to You

By
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From the Pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Luke 10:25-37

²⁵ An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” ²⁷ He answered, “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.” ²⁸ And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” ²⁹ But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and

bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” ³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Deuteronomy 30:8-14

⁸ Then you shall again obey the Lord, observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, ⁹ and the Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, ¹⁰ when you obey the Lord your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. ¹¹ “Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ¹² It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ ¹³ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ ¹⁴ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

Then you shall again obey the Lord, observing all God's commandments that I am commanding you today and the LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, when you obey the LORD your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

This is the word of THE LORD. Thanks be to God.

A few weeks ago, I was in the Cape Winelands of South Africa, near Stellenbosch, where my spouse Karen was attending a conference of sociologists and missiologists from around the world who share research about the future of the church. Several of the people in this group, called the International Consultation on Ecclesial Futures, are runners, so they all get together for a morning run, which includes a mid-run prayer. The leader of this group, Frederick, is sort of famous for his prayers, to the extent that one other guy joked it wouldn't be long before he pulled communion elements out of his running shorts.

One early morning, running alongside a busy road in the early morning darkness, headlamps bobbing along, Frederick said abruptly in his Afrikaans-inflected English, “Time to pray,” and he made his way to the shoulder of this busy road. It wasn’t a particularly auspicious or even safe place to pray with 18-wheelers trundling by and people on bicycles headed to work. And yet there we prayed. Frederick’s ancestors are French Huguenots and the group had been to their museum and memorial the previous day so he began:

God we remember the Huguenots who were brought to this valley against their will from France several centuries ago. We remember they were lost and cold, that they barely survived the first winter, and that didn’t know how to produce any food.

We remember the Khoi San people, the native inhabitants of this valley, who taught them how to survive this wild country.

He continued.

God, we remember the Pniel people, brought here as slaves from Malaysia and Sri Lanka so long ago and we remember that when they were freed they bought land and houses and they built churches and communities in this valley.

He had forgotten something about the Huguenots.

God, we remember how the Huguenots were not treated fair and how they were forced to forget their language and speak Dutch and we remember that we don’t speak French still.

A semi-truck screamed by a few feet from us.

God, we remember the wagonmakers who came to this valley who taught us to grow wine and we remember how we have prospered as a result.

We remember apartheid. We remember that Black people were kept out of that prosperity and that we forced them to live in terrible conditions. We remember being separated from one another.

Some people on bicycles with no lights sped past us.

We remember Mandela. We remember he was in prison in this valley. We remember how he befriended and forgave his jailors. We remember that he led us into democracy.

We remember all the ways that we here in this circle and elsewhere are strangers in foreign lands and so we remember immigrants and refugees. We remember that we are estranged from each other and so we ask your help.

We remember our Lord and savior Jesus. Amen.

And there was a moment of peace. No trucks or other pedestrians. Just the mountains in the distance, beginning to turn grey against the blackness of the rest of the sky and valley. I thought we all felt something beautiful and profound had just happened but that thought went away quickly as Frederick asked, "Was it long enough?" And then he ran off down the road, not to my eyes noticing whether any vehicles were coming.

I couldn't ignore the whiplash. Frederick's prayer had been so in the present tense. He prayed for things that he couldn't possibly have remembered and yet he made us feel like we remembered them all together. Mandela in prison at Drakenstein, the wagonmakers who brought grapes, the enslaved people from southeast Asia, the Huguenots, ourselves: it was all right here, in this immediate moment. And then, with

hardly any ceremony, we were back running and dodging potholes and trucks again. The profound connection with one another and the past, and the breeziness with which he kept it moving. How could these things be?

Episcopal theologian Katherine Sonderegger – my favorite theologian - writes about God's self-disclosure among us in hidden places and she uses the example of the burning bush to make her point. The story goes that God called Moses to lead the Israelite people out of Egypt and into the land of Canaan from a burning bush, which, importantly, burns but is not consumed. Meaning there is a fire burning in the bush, but the bush does not itself catch fire. Some traditions even call it the unburnt bush. This, she argues, is how God shows up: God burns within creation but does not consume it. God discloses Godself but does not annihilate us in that disclosure.

That early morning by the side of the road outside Wellington, South Africa was a place where the fire burned but did not consume. The divine fire collapsed time and bound us all together – it burned within Frederick and yet he was not consumed. He was still himself – prayerful and knowledgeable about history, yes, but also funny, a bit self-deprecating, very Dutch. The fire burned but did not consume.

This past week, 9 youth from this church went on a mission trip to Charlotte, North Carolina with our partners at CROSS Missions, an outreach of the Myers Park Presbyterian Church. CROSS Missions' theme for the summer is Mountains, Valleys, and Plains, the idea being that God is with us in the high places, pits of despair, and in the everyday boring existence of our lives. And since God is with us in all these parts of our lives, we are empowered to do great things, even and especially as young people.

It will not surprise you a little bit I'm sure to hear that the youth of this church were engaged participants in the program. They learned a lot, they contributed well to the program and at their service sites, and I learned a lot from them.

Frederick's prayer and Sonderreger's take on the burning bush was fresh in my mind all throughout the week as I watched God's divine fire burn within our youth but not annihilate their personalities, energy, or adolescence. I experienced the whiplash of a moment of deep prayer followed immediately by running into the street without checking for traffic.

And in this text from the end of Deuteronomy, part of the farewell address of Moses, the same man called out of the burning bush 150 pages ago. Here he is reminding the Israelites on the eve of their entry into the land of Canaan that they need not go to the edge of the wilderness, to the mountains, to the valleys, or to the plains – they do not need to look upon a burning bush – to find the divine fire of the law burning. Indeed, the word of God is very near to them. It is closer than they think.

As Frederick prayed by the side of that busy road, I wanted to change the externalities of our circumstances. I wanted to fix our location and make it safer and more comfortable. And yet part of what made the divine fire burn so brightly in that place was that it was right where the fire decided to burn within Frederick. Or maybe it's just where Frederick wanted to catch his breath.

But as the world collapses around us – as children are swept away by rivers in Texas, as people are bombed while lining up for aid in Gaza, as immigrants are rounded up and deported en masse – the temptation is great to go to the ends of the earth to fix this. To say that we will climb

any mountain, pass through any valley, cross any sea, go to heaven and back to change the world when it is this messed up. We are more aware than ever of the injustices all over the world and yet just as able to do something about them as ever before. Which is to say, we cannot do nearly as much as we would like to change the external circumstances of the world.

And so we are here, standing on the side of the road, 18-wheelers buzzing by, praying that we will be transformed by remembering God's provisions for the ones who have come before us. Praying that God's fire will burn but not consume. That God will lead us into an uncertain future where the only thing promised to us is that the word of God, the law that keeps us in covenant with God and neighbor, will be very near to us. Burning within us.

One day this past week, our group of middle and high schoolers went to a day program for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. After a few tasks like painting and organizing, our group was asked to go into the community room and join the folks for a game of bingo. They were given some ice breakers but mostly just asked to go and be. Some clients were verbal – many were not – so conversation was possible but limited. The program is mostly funded by the public benefits the clients receive from the government, which is to say these people are more vulnerable now than they have ever been. One man, blind and agitated because you cannot play bingo if you cannot see the bingo card, was hitting himself in the head and swearing.

There was much to fix in that room. There was much in that room that was not as it should be. And yet, the youth of this church knew instinctively that they did not need to travel across the ocean or to heaven and back for God's promises to be fulfilled. The word of God was very near to them –

God was present in the mountains, valleys, and plains – and so they didn't need to fear. They could companionably blot out numbers as they were called from the front of the room and that is what they did.

The Israelites did not end up doing so well once they crossed over into the land of Canaan. Things don't look much better for us. It is unclear how to fix this. I worry that so much of our understanding of God's providence, particularly as people of means, is wrapped up in our ability to exercise agency in fixing the world around us. And right now, we can't really do that. And yet God's word is very near to us – by the side of a busy road in South Africa, in the day room at a program for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, in the lives of the young people of this church, in our own feelings of helplessness – God is very near to us in all the hidden places where God's divine fire burns but does not consume.

Amen.