



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*God at the Movies, Flops:
Friends in low places*

Luke 10.25–37

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Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 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." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 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.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

According to the IMDB (Internet Movie Database) website, "Dances with Wolves" is considered to be one of the top 100 greatest movies of all time ranking in at number 59, just between *Jurassic Park* and *Braveheart*.

"Dances with Wolves" is a 1990 American epic western film that tells the story of a Union Army lieutenant who travels to the American frontier to find a military post, and of his dealings with a group of Lakota Indians.

2 The movie was nominated for 12 Academy Awards and won seven, including Best Picture of the Year.

The movie also won a Golden Globe Award for Best Motion Picture and in 2007 was preserved in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant.”

Defying expectations, *Dances with Wolves* proved instantly popular, eventually earning great critical acclaim, making \$184 million in the US box office and \$424 million in total worldwide and because of the film’s popularity and lasting impact on the image of Native Americans, the Sioux Nation adopted Costner as an honorary member.

So the question is why would a film that by most standards was incredibly successful end up in our series of movie flops? A fair question.

As many of you know, during my time in seminary it was a requirement that we take part in a cross-cultural experience. To fulfill this requirement, I spent two weeks on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. Pine Ridge is home to the Lakota Indian tribe. The Lakota trace their roots to the Sioux tribe. Because most of the filming was shot on location on or near Pine Ridge and also because it featured the Lakota Sioux tribe, “*Dances with Wolves*” was required watching before our trip.

Understandably, it wasn’t long into our trip before someone from our seminary group asked one of our Lakota guides how they felt about the film. The enervated and agitated look on his face spoke volumes. While he shared that many on the reservation were appreciative that their culture was recognized and portrayed in a much more respectful way than the “cowboys and Indians” type of narratives they were used to, in the film, ultimately the help or hero came

from, the white man. In the end to the Lakota living on Pine Ridge, the film was a flop.

Journalist David Sirota referred to *Dances with Wolves* as another classic “white savior” film, as Dunbar “white male lead, fully embeds himself in the Sioux tribe and quickly becomes its primary protector.” He argued that its use of the “noble savage” character type “preemptively” blunts criticism of the underlying White Savior story.

The premise of the film contrasts significantly with the parable in our scripture for this morning. In “Dances with Wolves,” the help comes from an expected place, whereas in the parable of the Good Samaritan, help not only doesn’t come from the expected places (the priest or the Levite), but rather comes from the least expected source—the Samaritan.

While the focus of this very familiar parable is often on how we are called to be like the Samaritan showing radical hospitality, this morning I’d like us to focus on the perspective of the man who fell to the hands of the robbers.

While the parable doesn’t say whether or not the man who was robbed and beaten was Jewish, we can be pretty certain the intended audience of this parable was Jewish. This is why the twist in this parable is so shocking. The pattern of three was common to Israelite ears however, the likely pattern would have been more like: a priest, a Levite and then an ordinary Israelite. But, all expectations are shattered when the hero of the story turns out to be non-other than—a Samaritan.

To be clear, Samaritans were generally thought of unfavorably by the Israelites. Samaritans were regarded as unclean people, descendants of the mixed marriages that followed from the Assyrian settlement of people from various regions in the fallen northern kingdom. Biblical scholar Alan

4 Culpepper writes that “By placing a Samaritan as the hero of the story, Jesus shows that social position, race, religion or region count for nothing.”

At the heart of this parable is the teaching that our neighbors aren't simply those who share the same social, economic, racial, religious, regional or cultural make up as us, but rather everyone. Going further, Jesus challenges the feelings of superiority of the Israelites by providing an example of how we can all benefit from being open to receive from our neighbors, whoever they may be—even those who could be counted as the least among us. Perhaps we really do have “Friends in low places.”

Not that he really had a lot of choice in that matter, but in order for the parable to work, the beaten man had to be willing to accept the help he was given from the Samaritan. This is a logical but often overlooked aspect of this parable.

One of the things I do think the film, “Dances with Wolves,” does well is to portray the idea that help came from the most unexpected place for both the white soldier and from the Sioux tribe. At first, neither expected they could help each other, but by being willing to accept each other's help and to work together to try and communicate—they were able to achieve much more together than they were ever able to achieve on their own.

The film does a great job of showing how important being open and willing to trust is in the process of giving and receiving help and how difficult that can be. It also shows how sometimes we need to stretch ourselves beyond the barriers of culture, perspective and even language in order to achieve that trust, understanding and cooperation.

It can be difficult for many of us to accept help from others we care about. But in a time when lines of division are being drawn everywhere and the idea of treating our neighbor as

ourselves is difficult to see, it can feel almost impossible to open ourselves to help, ideas or knowledge from those we see as our Samaritans.

Famed author and Theologian Leonard Sweet, who I will have the opportunity to work with at our denominations Annual Conference this year says that the world is becoming more global and more tribal all at the same time. In order to break down the walls that separate us, we need to be open to others, not just as a matter of serving them, but also to allow ourselves to be served by them. As we will sing in the hymn “Will you let me be your servant,” “I pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.” Sometimes help can come from the places we least expect.

Too often we are more likely to offer help than to accept it. In a culture where being vulnerable is equated with being weak, we are not as likely to ask for help or even be open to it. In April, I had the opportunity to perform a benefit concert for the Pennsylvania Coalition against rape and sexual abuse. The guest speaker for the evening was famous fitness celebrity Shaun T., known for creating many of the BeachBody exercise programs such as “Hip Hop Abs” and “Insanity.” For this event, I worked closely with Shaun and I must say it was an incredibly inspiring experience.

We worked together to provide a great program for the coalition and even had some fun in the process. Somewhere lurking on the corners of social media is a video Shaun T. giving me hip hop dance lessons. The rest of the band got a real kick out of that one.

Having had the opportunity to work with several well know celebrity entertainers, athletes and politicians, I can honestly say Shaun was certainly someone who walked the talk. His passion for helping others is infectious. One of the things that most impressed me about his story more so than

6 the fame and fortune, was that he was someone who came from a very difficult background. He grew up in a home environment fraught with poverty and parental alcoholism. He was survivor of childhood sexual abuse himself, being sexually abused by his stepfather until he was 14. The story of his childhood was tragically intense. But the part to his story that was most impressive was not just that he was able to pull himself up from all of that with the help of others, but after all he had been through, that he was able to open himself up to others and receive their help along the way.

His journey going from being a homeless teen, 50 pounds overweight, to where he is today was not an easy one, but he claims that he couldn't have done it without the help of those good Samaritans he met along the way, but also his willingness to be open to receiving their help.

As a teacher, I see the best results time and time again from those who are most willing to actually take the teaching I am offering.

Jesus calls us to show radical hospitality but Jesus also calls us to be disciples. Another word for disciple is student or learner. We are called to be lifelong learners.

In my own life, the times I've achieved the most success have been the times I was willing to put my ego aside, be willing to be vulnerable and be open to accept help. It was in those times that I was certain I had all the right answers and didn't even need to consider the opinion of someone else that my growth was stagnant at best.

During some recent spring cleaning, I came across some old cassette tapes. As I listened through them, I found one that was a recording of one of my very first band rehearsals. I was about 13 years old and we were preparing for an upcoming gig. This was right around the time that Natalie

Cole re-recorded the song “Unforgettable” using a previous recording of her father, Nat King Cole to create a duet. This was one of the songs we were practicing.

At one point I played a...let’s say questionable chord. My father, in an attempt to make a suggestion while navigating a 13 year old’s maturity said that maybe...just maybe... there was another chord that we could use there. I quickly said, no! I’m absolutely sure that’s the right chord, I’ve checked it all out and I was certain I was right. In listening to this recording I was embarrassed because it was obvious to me the chord I was playing was indeed completely wrong. A simple illustration of how we can often be our own worst enemies when it comes to accepting help that we need. It was showing an example of knowledge coming from the most unlikely of all sources—parents.

Now all of this is contingent on finding the right help. It’s important that we always consider how the help, knowledge or information we are receiving jives with our own sense of reason and values. It’s also important that we evaluate the teacher (is this someone who actually knows what they are talking about and has a proven track record of success) and what their motives are for helping (what are they getting out of it? Or do they have a less than desirable motive?)

Trusting others can be difficult. And there are times when our trust will be mishandled. However, we are still called to be disciples and part of that is being willing to be vulnerable and accept help when we need it.

If it wasn’t for the help of others, Shaun T. would never have achieved what he has. I found this to be true in my own life and I’m sure we can all relate—if it wasn’t for the help of others we wouldn’t be where we are today.

8 While the man in Jesus' parable never in a million years thought he could receive help from a Samaritan, and while I never in a million years thought I would receive a correct chord from a parent or personal hip hop dance lesson from Mariah Carey's choreographer, I encourage all of us to look for ways to be that Good Samaritan to others, being willing to treat our neighbors as ourselves, but also be open to help, learning and friendship from even the most unexpected of places.

