

JOURNAL OF LUTHERAN Mission

December 2015 | Vol. 2 | No. 5

Special Issue

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Published by The Lutheran Church—
Missouri Synod.
Please direct queries to
journaloflutheranmission@lcms.org.
This journal may also be found at
www.lcms.org/journaloflutheranmission.
Find the *Journal of Lutheran Mission* on
Facebook.

Editorial office:
1333 S. Kirkwood Road,
St. Louis, MO 63122-7294,
314-996-1202

Member: Associated Church Press Evangelical Press Association (ISSN 2334-1998)
A periodical of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s Offices of National and International Mission.



With the lawyer, we ask, “And who is my neighbor?”

SERMON FOR INTERNATIONAL LUTHERAN COUNCIL

2015 WORLD CONFERENCE, BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA

by Hans-Jörg Voigt

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

We don’t obey Him
when we do nothing
for the human beings
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Jesus comes to you as
the Good Samaritan on
His donkey.

robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:25–31).¹

Introduction

Dear brothers and sisters, Ahmad U’s flight from Syria took 71 days. It cost 3000 Euro, which his parents had given him after the neighbor’s house was lost in a shell crater and they were afraid to lose their lives also.² He wore through seven pairs

of shoes. “On a checkpoint of the government in Syria we got a beating till somebody of our group revealed who the criminal escape agent was. He had to give them 50.000 Syrian pounds, (at least 250 Euro) and then we were allowed to go. On other checkpoints we all had to pay some money,” reports Ahmad U. When they went from Turkey to Greece, the small group of refugees feared they would die. “We were on some sort of raft — with 36 persons! Shortly after we started the escape agent said we should hold the direction. Then he jumped into the ocean and swam away.”

“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.” Dear brothers and sisters, as you know, there is in these days the large disaster of people leaving their homes and becoming refugees. Therefore, I have chosen in this devotion to talk about the well-known example of the Good Samaritan.

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989).

² Nach einem Artikel von Raniah Salloum, *Spiegel*, Online vom 03.05.2015

Falling into the hands of robbers

“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.” The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was frequently used, but it was known to be dangerous. It took more or less a day to manage the 27 kilometers downhill. Directly after the Mount of Olives, the desert begins. The ancient historian Strabo tells how the Emperor Pompeius drove away the robbers there. That happened in about 50 B.C., but his success was a short one.

The story of Ahmed. U is such a story about robbers today. Criminal escape agents and lawless soldiers took away the money his parents had saved. Then he was left alone on a raft, and it was more or less a lucky chance that he and his group are not laying on the floor of the Mediterranean Sea. This summer, the Austrian police found 71 dead people smothered in a truck on an Austrian highway. They had no chance. It is hard to see such things. Where there is no law, where people don't know God and His commandments, robbers rule.

But now back to the example: “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.” I thought Jesus wanted to criticize the Jerusalem establishment at this point. But that is not all; this is a much heavier problem. The priest and the Levite did what they were supposed to do according to God's Law. In the third book of Moses it says: “A priest must not make himself ceremonially unclean for any of his people who die ... He must not make himself unclean for people related to him” (LEV. 21:1, 4).³

The priest and the Levite had done their service in Jerusalem. Now they were on the way home. They would have had the time to help. They reflect: “Should I help? Oh yes, I should. But what if the man is dead? I will become unclean. A priest must not to go to a dead person. I can't hold a service if I am unclean.” Both had good and pious reasons to leave the man alone. I did not realize this before. But they both lose by giving away their humanity in the end.

Dear brothers and sisters, perhaps there are reasons among us for hesitating to help refugees. You may ask what will happen because of Islam and how it will perhaps

change our society, a society that does not know much about the Christian faith. But Jesus also commands us to love our neighbors. We don't obey Him when we do nothing for the human beings robbed today by Islamist terror groups and others. I know there are good reasons, perhaps very pious and Christian reasons, to pass on the other side like the priest and the Levite. But if someone is lying there on the ground, Jesus does not want us to pass by on the other side and to continue on as if nothing has happened.

The Samaritan's help

“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.” It is well known that the Samaritans were disliked as enemies by the Jews. They knew they did not believe in God in an orthodox way. They were strange, and nobody wanted to have much contact with them. And one of these people is moved with pity. This word *σπλαγχνίζομαι* means “to be moved, to be emotionally involved.” You can translate it as “it goes through his stomach.” Jesus was also often moved with pity.

Luke as a doctor gives us an idea of the way medical help was given in these times. They indeed used wine and oil to cure wounds. The famous ancient doctor Hippocrates said so.⁴ We get to know more: “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.” That was good money; with one denarius a family could live for a day

We, too, in our days have to be moved with pity. We don't want to accept all of the good reasons not to help or these feelings of strangeness. In the past weeks I always felt that pity when I read my newspaper. It makes me feel ill — *σπλαγχνίζομαι* — it moves me to pity. So I think it would be good if the churches united in the International Lutheran Council (ILC) gathered for a conference on worldwide disaster response, as the Missouri Synod suggests.

In closing

In my mind, I am sitting beside you and trying to take my own words seriously. That does not make me very

³ *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996 (electronic ed.).

⁴ Ulcer., 881, in Bovon EKK III/2, S. 91.

happy. I see how little I do and how much I have not done that would have been possible. I think of the lawyer, who answered from God's Word: "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 neighbour as yourself." And then I see my small love for God and my neighbors. Perhaps you and your church need help for yourselves. You have reached the end of your strength and courage and love, and now you have to hear such a sermon!

At the end of this sermon, Jesus comes to you as the Good Samaritan on His donkey. He comes with His wounds, and He is wearing the robe of a shepherd ("Samaritan" translated means "shepherd"). He stops beside you and sees your wounds and, full of love, puts you on His animal. Then He brings you to the inn and pays for you with His life and feeds you with bread and wine, His body and blood.

I hope this conference may help us to strengthen one another and show you that Jesus' love will give you new strength. Amen.

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