

In the ✠ name of Jesus.

It was this past Wednesday. I was returning from the hospital, having visited a saint of Zion who had a short stay in hospital. I came through the double doors and my eyes adjusted to the interior lights. There was a man sitting there on the bench outside the office. He was waiting for me. “Ah,” I thought, “that’s whose vehicle is parked just outside.”

He knew it when he saw me; nevertheless, he asked, “Are you the pastor?” “Hello. Yes, I’m Pastor Punke,” I answered. He didn’t share his name; instead, he looked down, as if he were ashamed to be there.

I sat down on the bench beside him. With a bit of a quiver in his voice, fiddling with the papers in his hands, and still looking down, he explained. “I’ve just gotten out of the hospital. Had my hip replaced. I’m from Marion, and I don’t have any gas to get home. Can you help me?”

Mind you, I get requests all the time. Ask Carol. Ask Creasie. Ask anyone who’s worked in the office for a day. They have all tried (and often failed) to protect me from such visitors. And with good reason. I hope it’s no surprise to you that in our sin-filled world there are people who will try to take advantage of the church and her pastors. There are people who will lie and deceive and con a gullible pastor out of money, food, gasoline.

I know all this, that is, I can intellectualize it. And I know that I’ve been duped before. The con artists are actually pretty good at it. On the other hand, I’ve told some of them, “You know, I don’t really believe you.” “Oh, I’ll pay it back, when I get my paycheck,” or whatever! “That would be good,” I respond, not really expecting that any of that will come back to me or to the church. I can tell you: I’ve never gotten my hopes up, and I’ve never been surprised. No one has ever come back to return the church’s benevolence.

Oh, and just to let you know, I never just give out cash...never. These days, the church offers a limited number of food vouchers to Community Harvest Food Bank. For food requests, I give them something like that—a voucher. If they’re hungry and there are some leftovers in the refrigerator in the kitchen, I’ll give them that. If it’s gasoline they need, I’ll get a gas card from Julie’s Scrip store, and leave a note to have Marge pay for it. Poor Marge. Oh well. She knows me by now. If it’s none of that, I may go with them to wherever they need, and pay for that.

You might be asking, “Why do you do that, Pastor, when you think they’re trying to dupe you?” You know, I’ve become a bit wiser, perhaps, and a bit more cynical. Nevertheless, Luther, who said, “There is hospitality wherever the church is,” influenced me here quite a bit. Luther also taught, “Undoubtedly idle men

frequently took advantage of Abraham by abusing his generosity and flocking to him, for they knew that a table was prepared for them where he lived and that everything was placed at their disposal. ... If we are deceived now and then, well and good. In spite of this our good will is demonstrated to God, and the kind act which is lost on an evil and ungrateful person is not lost on Christ, in whose name we are generous." He says, on the one hand, "we should not intentionally and knowingly support the idleness of slothful people." On the other hand, Luther continues, "when we have been deceived, we should not give up this eagerness to do good to others." LW3, pp. 179-83.

So all this always is running through my head as I dialogue with those who come to the church for help. One other thing, by the way: not only do I not give out cash, but also no one leaves Zion with only material help. They always leave Zion having had an extended conversation with me about their life, and what put them in this situation, with an admonition to live in godliness, if I discover, as I often do, that they're living in a way displeasing to God, with a conversation about their relationship with the Lord, their church membership, and their faithfulness to receiving His gifts, with an admonition to be faithful to their church home, and if they have none, with an invitation to join us at Zion, making this their home, telling them about the rigorous process for membership. That latter is not to scare them off, but to let them know how seriously we take God's word and doctrine. Finally, they always leave Zion with prayers for them addressed to their situation.

So Luther's admonition is running through my head as I dialogue with these sojourners on life's path from Jerusalem to Jericho in which they have been waylaid by life's difficulties. But what does not pass through my head is much of what we heard in the Old Testament lesson. "*Leave the gleanings for the poor and the sojourner.*" "*Don't steal, deal falsely, lie, profane the Lord's name.*" "*Don't oppress your neighbor or rob him.*" "*Don't do injustice ... act righteously toward your neighbor.*" "*Don't slander.*" "*Don't hate.*" "*Don't take vengeance or bear a grudge.*" Not really even, "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" Although, surely you would all agree that list is righteous and good, that the Lord who gave us that list is good and holy. Surely, you would all agree that if everyone would live according to these statutes, the world would be a much better place. Then there would be no reason for police officers to shoot citizens, whatever their motivation was, or enraged citizens to shoot police officers. Surely you would agree things would be better if we followed the commandments that the lawyer quoted and the Lord identified as the two greatest: Love God and love your neighbor. As St. Paul said: "*Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.*"

Nevertheless, it was not all this law that was running through my head as I dialogued with this man on Wednesday. Of course, I can't help but be thinking of the texts for this Sunday. They are what I'm studying and pondering. So, I shared with the man sitting by my side the parable of the Good Samaritan. He had told me how the numerous churches he had been to for help, figuratively, passed him by. Similarly, the city's 211 help line had passed him by on the other side of the path. I told him the parable and reminded him of the lawyer's correct response to Jesus' question: "*Who 'proved to be a neighbor to the man'?*" The lawyer said, "*The one who showed him mercy.*" And I'm thinking of Jesus' reply: "*You go, and do likewise.*"

I'm thinking, "Who is this Good Samaritan? Who is this man who had compassion on the one waylaid by robbers, who showed him mercy? Who is this Samaritan, despised and rejected by the Jews? Who is this Samaritan traveling down the road from Jerusalem, taking on '*the form of a servant*'? Who is this Samaritan that stooped down to meet the man lying half dead, who surely would have died had he not bound up his wounds, washed them clean, and poured on purifying oil and wine? Who is this Samaritan who placed the man and his burdens upon his own animal and brought him to a place of rest? Who is this Samaritan who provided for his care with the two denarii he left until he would come again? Who is this neighbor who showed such mercy?"

Who is He? Not everyone today may agree on this, but I see none other than Jesus as the Samaritan, who, despised and rejected, "*made himself nothing,*" and came down from the heavenly Jerusalem. Jesus is the one who did not pass by you but stooped down to be born "*in the likeness of men.*" Jesus is your neighbor—He did all this for you, having compassion on you, dying carrying your sins, binding up your wounds, pouring on the cleansing oil and wine of baptism. Jesus is your friend—He put your burdens upon Himself and laid down His life for you, to redeem you from the impossible burdens of the law. Jesus has brought you to His church, where you may find your Sabbath—rest. And Jesus cares for you still—Jesus gives you the two coins of His Word of forgiveness preached and His Sacrament eaten to strengthen you for your journey in this vale of tears, until He comes again in glory.

And when Luther says, "the kind act which is lost on an evil and ungrateful person is not lost on Christ, in whose name we are generous." Yes, we are generous and neighborly in Jesus' name, because of Jesus' neighborly mercy toward us. Thankful for His grace toward us, and seeking to follow after Him, we "*Go and do likewise*"—not that we might justify ourselves and inherit eternal life—but loving because He first loved us.

I don't think this man duped me. Nor was the motivation lost on this man; his name was Joe. As I went into the office to get the gas card that would get him home, I heard him say under his breath: "Thank you, Jesus." He thanked the right person: "*We give Thee but Thine own ... All that we have is Thine alone, a trust, O Lord, from Thee.*" What do I have that has not been granted me by God? I'm glad he thanked Jesus. On this day I was simply a mouth and a hand in Jesus' body, the church.

May we also give thanks to God for His compassion toward us, for having "*qualified [us] to share in the inheritance of the saints in light,*" for having "*delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*" And having been strengthened in grace today by the two denarii of Jesus' word and Supper, may this Gospel increase and bear fruit in us, the fruit of love: the love of God and the love of neighbor, done ...

In the name of ✠ Jesus.