

Them

Scripture text: Luke 10:25-42

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Center Church on the Green, February 21, 2021



Every once in a while preachers face a kind of conundrum. Out of a current event we find the perfect story to go with the scripture reading we'd been planning for months and months. But unfortunately that story emerges out of a background of much pain and suffering and loss.

That bundling of great stories with horrific circumstances is not all that surprising, considering that the Bible itself is full of stories like that. The Exodus from Egypt is all about a miraculous liberation of oppressed slaves, but it is set against the death of firstborn sons and the drowning of an entire army. Much of the Old Testament is like that. And our own salvation story of Jesus' resurrection could not have happened without horrific suffering resulting in his death.

So, stories from our Scripture combined with the events that pepper our lives will usually have a mixed background. But sometimes we just can't help it because real life gives us a story that

seems like an episode of the TV show *Law & Order*—ripped from the headlines.

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And so this past week offers us a two-legged story set against the unusual freezing conditions in Texas and the pretty foreseeable issues with electricity and natural gas and water supplies. The first leg comes out of the little town of Colorado City, three hours west of Dallas and utterly unprepared for the arctic blast that swept in from the north on Sunday evening.

A thermometer reading 17 degrees may seem like moderate temperatures to us here in New England, but in Texas it's a genuine emergency. And in Colorado City, people started to wonder if they were going to survive it after two days in the dark. They started asking the town questions like whether a warming shelter was going to open, or what firefighters would do if there was no water available for their use.

They weren't prepared for the answer from their mayor. The mayor, a man they themselves had elected to lead Colorado City, posted on Facebook that he was, quote, "sick and tired of people looking for a damn handout!" Mayor Tim demanded that "lazy" residents go find their own running water and electricity. Mayor

Tim, a fellow resident of Colorado City, proclaimed that the strong would survive and the weak would perish.

Later that day Mayor Tim resigned his position and admitted he could “have used better wording.”¹

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And the second leg of this story comes from Houston. There’s a guy in Houston who is well known as “Mattress Mac.” That’s because he owns three furniture stores and has been known to wear actual mattresses as a costume in his TV ads.

I think of furniture stores as places that close during a natural disaster. They board up the windows, send the employees home, and wait for the storm to blow over. But, Gallery Furniture stores opened to help out local residents after Hurricanes Katrina and Harvey, and Tropical Storm Imelda. Jim McIngvale, known as “Mattress Mac” in his ads, did it again this past week.

He got the word out that he had emergency generators, food and water, heat, and a whole showroom of beds and loungers that were available for anyone who needed help. They could just come to warm up, or they could stay the night if they preferred. They

¹ “Texas mayor tells residents to fend for themselves during power outage: ‘Only the strong will survive’”, by Antonia Noori Farzan; The Washington Post via The Seattle Times, 17 Feb 2021, 11:43 a.m.; retrieved from the Web February 20, 2021.

could watch a movie or a basketball program on his big screen TVs if they'd like. His home showroom was their home.

Over 800 people have come in each day to warm up and get some hot food and drink, and about 350 people a night have stayed at two of his stores since Tuesday.

Mr. McIngvale said, "My wife and I were driving home from church last Sunday, and we came upon a police officer drawing a sheet over the face of a homeless person who had died in the cold. So of course I'm going to do something."²

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We've all needed neighbors in these past months of pandemic. But neighbors really need neighbors in Texas over this past week. I have a number of relatives and friends who live in the Lone Star State. Many of them are in or near the Nacogdoches area, and if they were unfortunate they were on the cold side of the storm. My dear brother and my friends have told me over the years how great Texas is to live, especially from December to March.

But even though Texas sometimes gets a taste of the colder temperatures that are routine for us, no one expected this icy blast.

² "For a frozen Texas in crisis, furniture store owner has emerged as a hero—again," by Cathy Free. The Washington Post, via The Seattle Times, 18 Feb. 2021 9:34 a.m.; retrieved from the Web February 20, 2021.

With no electricity...no natural gas...no insulation in the walls...no protection for the water pipes...it has not been easy. Some pulled in their stakes and hunkered down. Some felt really self-reliant. And some reached out in radically hospitable ways.

I think it's fair to say that in good times you may think you know who your neighbor is, but when adversity strikes you find out who your neighbor REALLY is. Mayor Tim in Colorado City? He was pretty sure he knew who his neighbors were. But in freezing temperatures and life-threatening conditions? He was nobody's neighbor in a week when people frozen in place by the storm could have used one.

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The robbery victim we meet today surely could have used a neighbor. Before we start, throw out the term "Good Samaritan"—it's not how Jesus described the Samaritan at all. His listeners had no good feelings about Samaritans. Luke tells us in chapter 9 verses 52 through 56 that a Samaritan village denied Jesus and his followers hospitality when they found out the band was headed toward Jerusalem. They're still feeling a little hot about it, so using a Samaritan as one of his characters is, let's say, provocative.

In a further nudge, the two other passers-by Jesus describes are well-respected figures in the Jerusalem scene. A priest? A Levite?

They were like, well, like MINISTERS. Of course they'd do the right thing. Of course they knew who their neighbor was.

But they don't act that way in this story of a naked stranger found bleeding by the side of the lonely road. The Levite and the priest? They don't come close to recognizing the scary-looking stranger as their neighbor. The Samaritan, widely seen as one of "the others" among Jesus' listeners, shows actual neighborliness.

If the man in the road was upright, clothed, and walking around, he might have nodded to the priest and the Levite in the Temple precincts. He might have passed well to the other side of the road had he encountered the Samaritan traveler and his donkey. And he might have been turned away from the Samaritan's home the same way Jesus' followers were.

But in the wilderness, when the man's life was in the balance, only the Samaritan would claim the man as his neighbor. Only the Samaritan would pick him up, bring him to a safe place, and pay for his care. Only the Samaritan would recognize the man as his neighbor.

And as we sit later in the home of Mary and Martha, we make the connection. Love is about radical hospitality, about welcoming the genuine stranger. Love may not break down all the barriers that separate "us" and "them"—at least not all at once. But the journey

of radical hospitality challenges notions of separation, notions of propriety. It demands our participation.

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We don't choose our neighbor. God chooses our neighbor for us, and points us in the right direction. In God's creation, it is not about "us" versus "them." Because, it is not our neighborhood. It is God's neighborhood.

And loving God with passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence means more than a solitary practice. It means loving the neighbor God chooses.