

**LENT 1 2010: FAITH IN ACTION SERIES #1**

**Luke 4:1-13 / 10:25-37**

***DIVINE DETOURS***

**INTRODUCTION:**

**This past Wednesday the season of Lent began.** The shorter definition of Lent is that it is the time before Easter: 40 days (*minus Sundays*).

**Lent is a time of preparation.** Historically, new converts were prepared to be baptized during Easter Vigil (the night before Easter Sunday). Those who had been distance from the life of the church showed their commitment to rejoin the community by demonstrating those things that characterized the Christian lifestyle.

For most Christians -- **Lent is a time in which we really focus in on the core spiritual disciplines of the life of faith.** Probably the most known part of Lent is fasting. We "give up" something for Lent. Of course, what we need to remember is that we give up something, so that we can make room for more God-centered activities.

And that's where the remaining two spiritual disciplines of Lent enter the picture:

Prayer and Helping Others in Need.

The season of Lent is meant to help us stay on course along our journey of life and faith in Jesus Christ. Not just for these 40 days -- but throughout our lives of followers of Jesus.

**And so -- the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is always the primary Bible lesson on the first Sunday in Lent.**

Again -- those who have grown up in the church, or been Christians for awhile -- know that just about all the sermons given on this story center on how Jesus stayed true to God's will for his life.

Satan tries to tempt Jesus to deviate from the true path the Messiah must follow.

Turning stones into bread to satisfy his own hunger...

Performing a death-defying, spectacular jump from the pinnacle of the Temple...

Avoiding the suffering of crucifixion by bowing down to Satan who in return promises to hand over all the kingdoms of the world...

All of these are **DEMONIC DISTRACTIONS....**which Jesus avoids.

**"Stay on the straight and narrow" becomes the lesson.**

That's what the man named Eli repeats to himself, and speaks almost as a prayer for strength. Eli lives in a post-apocalyptic world. All forms of law and order have just about disappeared from the earth. And yet, Eli is a man on a mission. A holy mission. What we know from the movie's promo is that Eli has in his possession the very last Bible. His God-directed journey is to take this treasure West to where it will be preserved and kept safe.

And so -- that is why Eli prays for strength to stay on the path. For what is happening just beyond the ridge behind which he is hiding -- is that a person is being brutalized. Eli has the means and ability to fight and help the person -- but he cannot be distracted from his mission to get the last Bible to its final destination.

The movie "The Book of Eli" is rated R. It has some rather raw language in it, and scenes that portray a violent world. **But, it also has a message.**

It might even be understood as a culturally relevant tool for evangelism. However, it's message is probably more powerful for followers of Jesus Christ. Because what Eli comes to understand and learn is that there is a difference between demonic distractions and **DIVINE DETOURS.**

The man, Eli, rediscovers that the Bible is just another book if one doesn't live the truth it reveals. And after wandering through the wilderness for decades -- Eli discovers that by following the Divine Detours that come from protecting another person -- he is able to complete his mission -- probably sooner than if he'd kept on in his own way.

Luke tells us about Jesus' temptations in the wilderness as a lesson about the nature of Jesus' calling and ministry -- and how Jesus remained true. The Messiah did not come to be served, but to serve. He came with authority and power, not to wield it through coercion, but to empower others to live and love according to God's purposes. Jesus did not bow down to demonic distractions.

But just 6 chapters over -- Luke recounts Jesus teaching about what it means to remain faithful by following **DIVINE DETOURS.**

**Turn with me to Luke 10:25-37.**

**We know this episode as "The Parable of the Good Samaritan."**

### **DIVINE DETOURS:**

It is while Jesus is traveling and teaching in the Judean countryside that he encounters a **Nomikos**, or "an expert in the Law." In that time and place, such persons were greatly respected as community leaders and professional interpreters of the Law (or the Scriptures). **They had three main areas of professional duty.**

1. The **explained the requirements** of the Law to ordinary people.

2. The **kept alive the memory** of past leaders, like the prophets.
3. They **trained others** in the knowledge of the Law.

Luke tells us that this lawyer had an underlying motive as he approached Jesus with his questions. **His motive was to test Jesus.** (*the same word used in Luke 4*)

He wanted to see if Jesus could handle a difficult theological question. But, Jesus turned the exam back on him. Jesus asked the lawyer -- how he interpreted the Law. In a sense, Jesus was saying, "Don't you know the answer?"

The lawyer can't resist the temptation to show off his theological sophistication. He answers:

*"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 love your neighbor as yourself."*

His answer actually did show a lot of insight into the basic tenet of all the Law and the Prophets. Jesus even reveals his own authority by essentially giving the man a grade. He says in effect, "You're right. You get an A+ for that answer."

But Jesus doesn't stop there, he says, "Do this, and you will live."

**This man was an expert in knowing, but not in doing.**

And what Jesus was saying then....and he says it to us today...

**... it isn't enough to know the right answer, you must do it.**

The Badger Herald was doing a feature on what are often called "professional students" at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. A 29 year, named Johnny Lechner, had just graduated after 12 years of being a full-time student. He said that he would stay longer if he could.

*"I'm broke. I've got no more money. Trust me, if I had the money, I'd stay longer.... The schedule is laid back, you're around all kinds of educated people. And we're all just broke college kids, too. It's not like the real world."*

What would you do if Johnny were your son? You'd probably advise him to grow up, join the real world, and contribute to it.

**When it comes to Christianity -- a lot of people do exactly what Johnny Lechner did:**

They stay in the safe environment.

They do their Bible study.

But they never go out into the real world, and put into practice what they know.

The lawyer who approached Jesus with the question of how to gain eternal life -- knew the answer. But when challenged by Jesus to go live the answer.... He still tries to get around it. He asks, "Who is my neighbor?"

The lawyer is trying to get the most narrow definition of the word, "neighbor." And in fact, generations of such professional interpreters of God's Law had narrowed it down to just those in one's immediate vicinity -- and JEWS.

To the lawyer -- "love your neighbor" meant love those of your own race and religion -- and you've fulfilled the law. If the person doesn't fit these qualifications, then they aren't a neighbor, and the law doesn't apply.

Now here's the thing....

...the lawyer's first motive may have been to test Jesus.

But now....he had another motive... to justify himself.

**He was trying to set Jesus up to give an answer that would excuse him from following the command to love his neighbor.**

He was looking for a legal loophole.

He was trying to justify his inaction.

And this is the key to Jesus' response.

You see most of the time -- we think the parable of the Good Samaritan is just about:

*"We should help people in need."*

But taken within its context of the lawyer and Jesus -- **it is also about excuses.**

**It's about self-justification.**

And it isn't just the lawyer's problem....

**It's our problem, too.**

We often justify ourselves from not helping others.

We tell ourselves that we can't help someone because it's too dangerous, too involved, too time-consuming, or we don't have enough money.

**And so Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan.**

**Jesus uses a situation and characters his listeners would be familiar with:**

We have a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. Even today, it is a rather treacherous trek. It is a rocky and steep decline from Jerusalem down to Jericho. And back in Jesus' time, it was also notorious for robbers.

So the man -- most likely a Jew -- is robbed and beaten so badly that he is left half dead.

**Then...we have three other characters:**

**First, is a priest.** The office of priest in Israel was of supreme importance, and of high rank in society. They represented the people before God, and were able to offer sacrifices because they followed the strict rules and rituals of holiness.

**Next, is a Levite.** Levites weren't quite as honored as priests. But they were, nevertheless, a privileged group in society. They were responsible for the liturgy and protecting the Temple.

Of course -- there were probably some snickers as Jesus told about how the priest and Levite passed the man by. The common people would expect such high fluting individuals to do so.

They would expect that Jesus (a common man himself) to introduce the next character as a Jew -- a common person of faith. **But the third character is a surprise.**

Jesus said **it was a Samaritan** who came by.

Again -- those who have done Bible studies -- know that the Jews and Samaritans despised one another. In fact, it goes all the way back to the rebuilding of the Temple. Samaritans were believed to be half-breeds and religious heretics.

**By using a Samaritan as the hero...Jesus is pointing out that it doesn't matter what you call yourself.**

Lots of people call themselves Christians -- who aren't really.

The Barna Group conducted a poll that found 84% of people in the United States identify themselves as Christians.

But ask yourself... do more than 8 out of 10 people in the U.S. live their faith as followers of Jesus Christ?

When Jesus asked the lawyer which of the three had been a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers, the expert in the Law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go, and do likewise."

Jesus uses the example of the "Good Samaritan" to show us a person who looked past excuses to stop and help.

The Good Samaritan chose to get off his usual route, and decided to take a Divine Detour on his highway of life.

### **FAITH IN ACTION: A LENTEN EXPERIENCE:**

The season of Lent is meant to offer us a Divine Detour in our regular and routine way in which we live out our life with Jesus Christ.

And our *FAITH IN ACTION* campaign of personal discipleship and community service is another purposeful deviation from our comfortable ways of "doing church" here at Divine Street.

We're going to be taking a **DIVINE DETOUR**. And like that taken by the Good Samaritan -- there are some things we need to know about following God to those people and places where God desires us to go.

### **1. A Divine Detour Takes a Risk:**

Sometimes, we justify ourselves not helping someone in need because we are afraid of the risk to us.

Now, I'll admit, there are times when taking a risk just may not be smart. For example, if you are driving down a back country road, and you see a sign that says, "Don't pick up hitchhikers," -- then you see a man in an orange jumpsuit with his thumb out, stopping to pick him up isn't just risky...it's dim-witted.

**The reality is that most of the time our problem isn't that we take too many risks; it's that we don't take ANY risks.** Martin Luther King, Jr. once said:

*"the first question the priest and the Levite asked was, 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But...the Good Samaritan reversed the question, 'If I do not stop and help this man, what will happen to him?'"*

**If we are going to love our neighbor, RISK can't be used as the excuse to hold us back.**

### **2. Divine Detours Take Personal Involvement:**

Some people use the excuse of not wanting to get personally involved in helping someone in need.

But the Good Samaritan did not use that excuse.

He didn't wait for someone else.

He didn't just call 911, or phone the pastor to get involved.

He didn't just write a check.

He got involved.

He was moved with compassion toward action.

He got in the ditch with the man.

He got close and bandaged the man's wounds.

He probably left that ditch looking dirty and bloody, himself.

If we are going to love our neighbors...

**PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT can't be used as THE excuse to hold back.**

### **3. Divine Detours Take Time:**

This is probably the **biggest factor for us in our day and time**.

So, often we use our schedules to justify not helping people in need.

In fact, this is the most common excuse.

We want "the church" to provide all sorts of service for us and our families -- but WE don't have the time to be the church and do all those great things we hear other churches do.

When it comes to helping and serving others... the **greatest ability is AVAILABILITY**.

When it comes to helping others in need, and loving our neighbors...we can't use time as THE excuse to hold back.

### **4. Divine Detours Take Money:**

*(you knew this was coming, didn't you?)*

Sometimes, we justify not helping those in need because it is going to hit our pocketbook.

The Samaritan did not use this as an excuse.

He made financial sacrifices to help the man in need.

The two silver coins he paid to the innkeeper represented two days' wages. Even more...he told the innkeeper he'd over any extra expenses it took to care for the man. *(and you know how expensive those little mini-bar Cokes can be!)*

### **WRAPPING UP:**

**Now, let's look at the story as a whole again...**

**Did Jesus answer the question, "Who is my neighbor?"**

Yes, he did. Your neighbor isn't necessarily someone who lives next to you

Your neighbor is anyone in need, anyone you can help.

**But notice - Jesus did more than answer the question.**

Jesus asked who was a neighbor to the man robbed and beaten.

The lawyer answered, "The one who showed him mercy."

Jesus told him, "Go, and do likewise."

**In other words, Jesus changed the focus of the question from: "Who is my neighbor?" to "What kind of neighbor are you?"**

**Let me ask you:**

"Would you want yourself as a neighbor?"

Would you want yourself to show up on the scene?

Would you stay on your normal route, or would you take a Divine Detour because Jesus says that loving God and others is the path to eternal life?

The Good Samaritan disadvantaged himself to advantage someone else.

As Christ followers -- we have the privilege to disadvantage ourselves to advantage others.

**Our spiritual journey calls us beyond managing our "to-do" lists.**

We are called into faith in action lifestyle that welcomes Divine Detours -- opportunities to demonstrate God's love to people in need.

This week, I challenge you to get off your normal beaten path of life. It doesn't have to be anything big.

- **Visit a neighbor** -- maybe the one down the street who you've lived near for years, but still haven't met.
- **Take a simple meal** to a widow or widower.
- **Volunteer to baby-sit** for a single parent.
- **Write a note** to a shut-in, or someone going through a difficult time.
- **Offer to bring** your child's friend to Sunday school and church with you.

The point is -- **Decide to take a Divine Detour.**

**Take action.**

**Love your neighbor.**