**Be The Church… The Good Samaritan Redone**

*By Brad Olson*

I really wanted a nice hot breakfast one day last week. I didn’t feel like making one, and my wife and daughters were away on a Mother-Daughter church retreat. I missed them, but I knew how much God moved them at these kind of things. Besides, I had a busy day ahead of me with little time to spare. So I went to my favorite café. It’s not much of a place to look at, but they serve great food. Comfort food, like Mom makes. The place is open 24 hours and is tucked away in a small spot between two shops in a building that looks as old as Chicago itself. The sidewalk smells of bacon every morning, which attracts the locals, and a few others who are suddenly hungry for bacon and eggs.

I took my seat in my usual spot, in the corner booth, which gives me the opportunity to watch the world interact like my own TV reality show. I hadn’t noticed the young girl to the right as I walked by to sit down. She was tucked away to the side, looking as if she wanted to disappear into the corner of the booth and lick her wounds… literally. She appears to have been injured somehow with a slight cut on her upper lip. I wondered what her story was. Was she a victim of a crime? Was she in a fight with her boyfriend? Maybe her father had just about enough of her, and they came to blows as he kicked her out of the house? Ah! There I go making up things you only see on reality TV. None of that could really happen here in this white bread Christian suburbia. But still, I wondered.

When she raised her head to take a drink of water, I recognized her as the troubled young girl from the corner house on Main. I don’t know much of her story, but I see her wandering town aimlessly fairly often. Her hair is disheveled and her clothes are a mess. I heard she had some drug problems and dropped out of college. I read a few years ago that she was picked up for shoplifting. She stole something silly, nail polish or nail clippers maybe. The kind of thing that makes you wonder how anyone could be so desperate for that thing that they steal it? Still, you lock the garage side door when you see her wandering the streets. I guess her parents didn’t make it easy on her. They were the talk of the town gossip circles at times. Her dad had an affair and her Mom didn’t care. The girl was a fixture in town enough that most people recognized her face and likely knew some of her trouble.

As I watched her sit there by herself, I noticed her wiping her eyes with a napkin. She had been crying. This is the first time I was ever close enough to see her face. She had beautiful eyes… big, brown, dark eyes with long lashes. But now, they were red and puffy from crying. She seemed to be choking back tears.

If you took the time to notice her, she stood out from the rest of the morning crowd. In the midst of notice dishes and orders shouted from the kitchen, she was just sitting there. She looked as if she had been sitting there for some time.

I began to notice how the others were responding to her. Most didn’t bother to notice at all, as if she were a part of the furniture she was sitting on.

I overheard a group of men talking about her. They were regulars, businessmen and leaders in the community. One owned the local car dealership. The tall, dark haired one was the president of the bank. Another, sort of a stocky, bald guy, worked for the electric company, some sort of executive of sorts, I don’t know exactly. I guess you might consider them some of the “pillars” of our community. They did quite well for themselves in business. I know they are the “anonymous” donors to the annual prayer breakfast at the country club. They have brought in some pretty big name speakers to that event. They are on the leadership boards as deacons or elders at their church in town. I think one of them even went to seminary. They were laughing as they glanced over at the girl. They would turn to each other, whisper loudly, glance at the girl, huddle their heads together again and laugh. I am not sure of all they were saying, but, I heard one of them say, “Serves her right”, just before they got up and left.

I noticed four women at the table in the front by the window. They had seen the girl as well and were talking about her. I recognized one of them as the leader of the “Women’s Praise Conference” held every summer for 2 nights at the local park. The Praise Conference has been a powerful event that God has used to touch people’s lives for 3 years now. It appeared like they were the planning team for this year’s conference, holding a meeting in preparation for the event. I heard them working out numbers and wondering if they should hit up the men for some contributions to make the conference even better than before. But between comments, the leader kept looking over at the girl. She looked disgusted at her. She looked at the girl, turned towards her friends, and whispered with a disgusted look on her face. They all shook their heads and looked away as they got up to leave.

At that time, I noticed the children’s pastor from the big church in town sitting at the counter. Amy is her name. She had this year’s VBS curriculum on the counter in front of her, probably preparing for another great year. I noticed Amy glancing back at the girl as well. But she seemed more focused on her job than the girl, and didn’t give her much notice. But, who could blame her? She is a great children’s pastor. She works long and hard hours. Last year, she brought in more than 1000 kids to Vacation Bible School. Boy, if only we could do something like that at our church.

A middle aged man walked in about 3 minutes before, waiting for an open table. He saw the women getting ready to leave and wanted the window spot. So he waited. I knew him. His name was Jim. He had walked into our church about 5 years ago. It was in the middle of the week. He wanted help. I recall that he had recently lost his job, and he was behind on house payments. I think it was all related to his drinking. He grew up a good Catholic boy, but never stepped inside a church past age 12. What struck me most about his story was his insistence that “God is a judgmental and angry God who doesn’t really care about him, and the people at his AA meetings are more of a church to him than any church he’s walked into.” Yet, he didn’t know where to turn, and thought it was the church’s job to help those in need. I tried to help him see that God loved him and could save his life, which was way more important the physical things of this world. I read Scripture to him and prayed for him. I invited him to a men’s Bible study on Saturday mornings, but he never showed up. I never heard from him again.

Jim noticed the girl. He walked over to her and asked if he could sit down. She nodded her head slightly without making eye contact. He asked some questions, I could see her lips move in response but could not make out what she was saying. They talked for no more than 10 minutes, though I think she did most of the talking. At one point, I noticed Jim slip her a $10 bill. She sheepishly took it from the table and slipped it into her pocket. A few minutes later, a slight grin came over her face, and she began to hold her head just a little bit higher. They talked a little more, and Jim pulled out his cell phone, said something in a firm, but fatherly way, and handed to her. She waited a moment before picking it up. She dialed a number and raised it to her ear. After the phone call, Jim took the phone back, got up and stood at the side of the table for a second. The girl jumped up and to his surprise, gave him a quick hug from the side… one of those hugs that says “thank you” better than words could ever say. Before he walked away, I heard him say firmly, but quietly enough for no one else to hear unless they were leaning in and wanted to hear, “Call me. If you are ever in trouble again, call me. If I can’t help you, I can find someone who can. Is it ok if I check in on you next week to see how you are doing?” She nodded her head yes. Jim walked out the door right past me. I don’t think he recognized me.

Me? I felt bad for her. I noticed for the first time that I had some compassion for her. She was just a kid, lost in her home town, trying to find her way. But now, I saw a face written with pain. Moved by her pain, I did what I could do- I prayed for her- right then and there- in the café- with my head down. I must have prayed for 5 minutes for her. Whatever was going on in her life, I prayed God would take care of. Then I got up and left. I was 5 minutes late to my meeting already. But, as soon as I got back to church, I asked the other staff members to pray for her as well. I told her story at the staff meeting during prayer requests. We prayed for her more that day than any other pressing issue in the church.

(pause- change scenes and tone of voice)

Put yourself in that story. What are your preconceived notions about what the church is or about being a “good” Christian? Is the church a place to go to on Sunday morning? Is it a place with big programs and our job as a good Christian is to participate in the programs? Is being a good Christian mean going to Bible studies, praise conferences or prayer meetings? Does a good Christian mean you are an elder or deacon at the church? Or, is what we have to offer as a community of believers to the hurting people of Chicago… prayer… period?

Or, are we called to more than that? Maybe our notions of what the church is and what we are supposed to be is distorted... lopsided. Maybe our notions fit our needs more than the needs of the community around us?

So, I ask you, in the story above, who acted more like a neighbor to the young girl in the café? And, more importantly, which one are you in the story?

***Luke 10:***

**27 The man answered, “‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.’ And, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” …**

**30 Jesus replied with a story: “A Jewish man was traveling on a trip from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road.**

**31 “By chance a priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. 32 A Temple assistantwalked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side.**

**33 “Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him.34 Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. 35 The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, ‘Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I’ll pay you the next time I’m here.’**

**36 “Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?” Jesus asked.**

**37 The man replied, “The one who showed him mercy.”**

**Then Jesus said, “Yes, now go and do the same.”**