

DANGERS ON THE ROAD FROM JERUSALEM TO JERICHO

West Parish Church of Andover, UCC
Vincent Maraventano

Luke 10:25-37
October 26, 2008

This morning I would like to speak about the magnificence and the fragility of God's creation. Fall is a time when the brilliant New England foliage displays the beauty of creation in ways that, although we have seen it before, continue to amaze us and leave us grateful for the wonder and the bounty of this blessed earth.

As beautiful as fall in New England is, I think the most beautiful and awesome piece of God's handiwork that I have ever seen is the Grand Canyon. I will always remember when I first saw it. The size and majesty, the endless arrays of shapes, shades and shadows, and the knowledge that a powerful river below had taken thousands of years to create this majestic work of sculpture left me awestruck and amazed. I first saw the Grand Canyon on a cross country trip that I took with my friends Mike and Jim after we graduated from college. We threw our sleeping bags, an old tent, and a hibachi into Mike's Chevy and off we went. I remember the Grand Canyon not only for its beauty and majesty but also because of what we did there. We arrived at the rim as tourists about 10:00 one morning. So impressed and exhilarated were we that we decided to hike into it. We read the signs about the heat going up to 120 degrees and the need to take enough water, but we were young, and undaunted. One of us was opposed to the idea because we didn't have enough water, but the excitement of the moment was too great. The majority wanted to go, so down we went.

It was incredibly beautiful. As we descended along the switchbacks and as the sun moved across the sky we were greeted by a seemingly infinite number of perspectives, one more spectacular than the next. About two-thirds of the way down the Colorado River came into focus, a blue ribbon, with twists of foaming whitewater. Although we were exhilarated, it had gotten very hot, and we were running out of water. So hot in fact that one of us had become exhausted.

We faced another decision. Some more experienced hikers recognized our plight & offered to share their food and tarps with us if we continued to go down and spend the night at the bottom. They suggested that it would be wise to do so and to begin the journey up the next day, at the coolest part of the day, just before dawn. We discussed their offer and disagreed with each other. One of us was adamant about returning up then, and that's what we did.

Shortly thereafter one of us, overcome by the heat could no longer continue. We were practically out of water. Another decision. What should we do? There was no one around. No one was going down or coming up. There didn't seem to be any good option. The one who could not go on agreed that the other two should continue up and try to find help. If there was no help that one would sleep alone on the trail. So two continued up. There was no help at the top. One of us slept alone on the trail that night, while the other

two ate and drank at a campground, and slept in tents. The next morning the third came up, none the worse for wear thank God.

Which one of those three was I you ask? Which one of those are you? Today it is the entire earth whose temperature is rising. The lure of inexpensive fossil fuels has led to an exhilarating journey of rising lifestyles. Now the heat is becoming intolerable and the magic elixir is running low. Will we be like hikers unwilling to accept the danger? Once we realize that we are in danger will we know enough to change course before it is too late? As I look back at my trip I can understand how we started on that hike without enough water. The lure was too great. We were too young to fully appreciate the danger. It's harder for me to understand how we could have refused the offer of help & refused to change our plan, and done what the circumstances dictated. Denial maybe? Fear of the unknown? Or maybe that old familiar, but always present, pride?

The parable of the Good Samaritan is another story of a dangerous descent and a stranger in need of help. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a descent of about 3,000 feet. It was dangerous because there were places for robbers to hide along the narrow and winding road. We know nothing about the victim. We assume that he was a Jew. We don't know why the priest and the Levite crossed to the other side of the road. Not only didn't they help, they sought to avoid him. It is the Samaritan who helps the victim and takes care of him and takes him to the inn. The Jews looked down upon Samaritans as half-breeds. The Samaritans had intermarried with Assyrians who had moved into the Northern Kingdom after conquering it. Although Samaritans considered themselves to be Jews, Jews considered them unclean and often hated them.

We have heard this parable many times. It reminds us that our obligation to love our neighbor extends beyond those in our community, or nation or social group and extends to all those in need. Perhaps we identify with the victim, perhaps with the Samaritan. But what of the priest and the Levite? These were learned men who had presumably studied the law. Yet it is the Samaritan, perhaps someone whom they considered unclean because not an observer of the law, who had compassion and demonstrated love of the half-dead victim. I wonder what became of the priest and the Levite. Were they so preoccupied with their own standing and their own responsibilities that they failed to see the suffering? Or did they wonder whether their failure to stop and help led to the death of another human being?

As with many parables we are left with questions. Perhaps it is the questions that are most important. Consider the question that begins the passage: "Teacher" he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" At the end of the parable after the lawyer says that the one who acted as a neighbor was the one who showed the victim mercy, Jesus says "Go and do likewise". What is most important, in the Hebrew Bible, in the New Testament and today is what we do to love one another.

The story of my hike reminds us of the need to recognize dangers that are evident both to our senses and our mind. Today there is no question that the planet is warming. We can feel it and see it. The overwhelming consensus of scientific opinion tells us that it is, and

that if we fail to reverse the trend in ten years it may become irreversible. There is no reasonable explanation for the cause other than the dramatic rise in greenhouse gases caused by human activity. Most of these are emitted by the burning of fossil fuels.

The parable of the Good Samaritan presents us with suffering that is evident and urgent. The victim is naked, beaten and half-dead. Perhaps our response to global warming would be more focused if we recognized the seriousness of the suffering it is causing, even though we may not see the victims along the side of Route 128 or Route 133. Yet the World Health Organization tells us that global warming is now causing about 150,000 deaths per year. Let us focus on just one dimension of the suffering. Starvation is increasing as a result of drought and the expansion of desert areas.

This is particularly serious in Africa. Lake Chad, once the sixth largest lake in the world has almost vanished. Arable areas in adjacent countries have shrunk causing massive starvation that has led to political instability. Once mighty Rivers like the Nile, the Indus and the Ganges now only flow intermittently during dry seasons. On top of that the diversion of corn, rice and soy crops for use as fuel additives has increased the cost of food to those in most need.

There are many other examples of startling changes being caused by global warming. A senior EPA scientist told me a few months ago that the water level of Lake Superior, the second largest lake in the world by area, has dropped 24". There is a danger that further decreases will disrupt electricity supplies in the Great Lakes region generated by hydroelectric power.

The moral dimension of this crisis however confronts us most starkly by the deaths and suffering being caused in Africa and other parts of the developing world. The United States emits 25% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions with only 5% of the world's population. Global warming is a justice issue. Our role in causing it creates a clear moral obligation to solve it.

This is a serious and a complex problem. It requires changes in individual patterns of behavior, new institutional policies and new public policies. There is no silver bullet but there is a basic prescription. That prescription is conservation AND increased efficiency AND renewable energy. You probably already know quite a bit about conservation and efficiency. If you want to learn more, please join me and others at a presentation to be held here at West Church on Saturday November 15, 2008 at 3:00 PM.

Although the challenges are daunting there is much cause for hope. Awareness of the issue has increased dramatically. The faith community is responding. Today West Parish along with South Church and Christ Church in Andover will ring their bells 350 times to declare to the world the goal of 350 parts per million of CO2 recently revealed by NASA climate scientist James Hansen and others. The Episcopal Diocese through its Genesis Covenant has declared a goal of reducing the carbon emissions of its churches by 50%. The West Dennis Church of the UCC has received EnergyStar designation from the USEPA, one of the first faith communities to do so.

Renewable energy is making tremendous strides. The United States could provide for its entire electrical demand on our current roof tops, even with existing solar technology. The American solar industry has been growing at a rate of about 20 to 40% a year. Wind power is ready now. Three states, North Dakota, Kansas and Texas have enough harnessable wind energy to meet all US electricity needs. Since 2000, electricity generation from wind power has doubled every three years. In Massachusetts you can purchase electricity generated by renewable sources through the Clean Energy Choice Program. For every dollar spent on renewable energy up to \$1 in grant money is earned by the town of Andover and up to one additional dollar for the energy conservation and renewable energy needs of low-income people. Andover has earned \$23,000 in grant money and hopes to earn enough to install a solar panel on a public building or school in Andover.

The story of my hike into the Grand Canyon and the story of the Good Samaritan have happy endings. The story of the earth's future is being written by people around the world every day. I invite you to reflect on whether you may be called to help shape the end of this story? Are you passionate about conservation, efficiency or renewable energy? Would you like to change your behavior patterns, work to reduce your church's carbon footprint or get involved with environmental education or advocacy? If so I invite you, I urge you to join with others here at West Parish. Do one thing, and then another and then another. Faith communities across the United States are forming ministries to provide a religious response to the crisis of global warming. If I may quote the parable of the Good Samaritan, "Go and do likewise." If not us who? If not now, when?