

“Life: A Hero’s Story” / Unit 3: Rescuers

Sermon 3: “You shall be my witnesses in Samaria” / November 17, 2019

Key Texts: Acts 1.8; Acts 8.1, 4-7, 14-17

Key Words: Witnesses, Philip, Samaritans, Peter, John, Prejudice, Hate, Forgiveness, Grace, Turn or Burn, Penn Gillette, Enemies

Summary: One of the hardest things God tells us to do is to share Jesus with those we don’t like, or who don’t like us. Sometimes being a “witness” starts with forgiveness.

(FILM CLIP BUMPER -- A Time To Kill: “I hope they burn in hell!”)

How many of you guys remember the movie, “A Time to Kill.” Believe it or not, it’s over 20 years old now! Great movie! A ten-year-old black girl is abducted, raped, and beaten by two white guys in Canton Mississippi, back in the days when two white guys could do stuff like that and get away with it. Her father – Carl Lee Hailey – shoots the rapists dead, and now he is on trial for murder. And that was one of the most famous scenes. Because, most every dad watching and listening, well, we’d probably feel the same, wouldn’t we?

Have you ever wished for someone to burn in hell? Be honest! Have you ever said, “You can go to hell!” and you really meant it? Have you ever hated anyone so fiercely that you just can’t wait for God to make him pay ... forever?

Now, two weeks ago I said something pretty weird to you guys. I said, “I wish I could arrange for all of you to spend one day in hell, or at the entrance to hell. Just one day. Just to watch the faces of those entering: Faces of those you don’t know, and the faces of those you do know. Faces of those you don’t like, and the faces of those you do like, because some of your friends, and neighbors, and colleagues are headed there too. ... You see, sometimes we forget what is really at stake in all this!

And then last week I amped it up. I said, “I wish I could arrange for all of you to spend one day in hell. This time, just to watch the face of a mom or a dad who might be headed there; or the face of a sister or a brother; a son or a daughter; a grandson or a granddaughter.” And we talked about THE single most important job any of us have in this world: to do whatever we can to connect our spouse, our kids, our grandkids, our siblings, our kin ... to Jesus ... forever. Remember that stuff? If not, you can go to CapCity.info and catch up.

Well, I'm going to alter the scenario a bit today. Because my suspicion is: if I had the ability to watch your face, during your day in hell as you were watching the faces of those going in... If I were to watch your face, I might see an occasional smile, maybe. Maybe an occasional look of satisfaction, or approval?

- I might see you smile when recognize one of those jihadi terrorists! “Not quite the 72 virgins you were expecting is it, you murderous dog!”
- Or maybe when you recognize a rapist. When you have heard stories of some brutal murderer, or rapist, have you ever thought to yourself, “I hope he rots in hell”? Would it feel good to see it happen?
- Or maybe ... maybe you see the face of an ex, who hurt you so deeply, and you're thinking, “Thought so!” You know, the who left you hanging, and ran out on your kids.
- Or maybe you see the face of that bully, or that boss who fired you, or that neighbor who made your life so miserable. Would you feel any sense of justice, satisfaction, gratification?

Is it possible ... is it possible ... that some of us might actually “enjoy” at least that piece of our day in hell – seeing those faces? Getting justice ... finally! Getting what was coming to them. ... Well, we're in a little 4 week series we're calling “Rescuers.” September was about our rescue – by Jesus. October was about living a rescued life. How to do life as Jesus followers every day. This month we are focusing on becoming rescuers, because if you hang with a hero, you might find yourself doing heroic things. Acts 1.8: Jesus says, “You will receive power (you will receive power – strength, courage) when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And (then, with the power of God in you) you will be my witnesses, (he says; all of you will be my witnesses; every one of you will be my witnesses) telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (1.8)

Last week we focused on witnessing to those in Jerusalem and Judea. In other words: start where you are. Start with people you like, and with people who like you. Especially, start with family. This week will be way, way harder. Jesus says, “Witness to those in Samaria too.” In other words: I want you to take Jesus to those you don't like, to those who don't like you. “Witness to those in Samaria too ...” People you know, but despise; people you hate; people who have messed you up, or maybe they've messed up people you love. God wants us to take Jesus to them too?!

Let me start off by telling you how the earliest Jesus followers pulled it off. Because Acts 1.8 is kind of an outline for the book: He says, “You shall be my

witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea.” And they did it – that’s the first 7 chapters of Acts. Then he says, “You shall be my witnesses in Samaria.” Which they did next. That’s Acts chapter 8. And then Jesus says, “And, you shall be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.” Which, for them, was the rest of Acts.

Part 2, chapter 8, the Samaria part, opens like this. Luke says, “A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria.” (Acts 8.1) So, the guys who had killed Jesus started coming after us Jesus followers, because we were telling people that Jesus really was the Son of God, the Messiah, and that God had raised Jesus from the dead.

Down to verse 4: “So the believers who were scattered (by the persecution) preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went.” They can chase us, but they can’t shut us up! So this guy named “Philip, for example, went to the city of Samaria (to the city of “Samaria”!) and told the people there about the Messiah.” ... Now ... why would he do that? I can understand why he might hide in Samaria: Jews hated the Samaritans, and the Samaritans hated the Jews. Philip’s pursuers might be reluctant to chase him into Samaria. But why would he preach Jesus there? Jesus was the Messiah of the Jews, wasn’t he? Not the Samaritans! And why would the Samaritans listen to him? Why would they care about the Messiah ... of the Jews?

Now, think of the people you hate most, and put your hatred on steroids. Jews and Samaritans had hated each other for nearly three times as long as the United States has been a country.

- Over 600 years before the king of Babylon had defeated the Jews, and destroyed their temple, and taken the best of the best into exile. They left behind the people who didn’t matter. And for generations those people who didn’t matter intermarried with other people who didn’t matter, and they became the half-breed Samaritans.
- When the upstanding Jews got back from their exile they rebuilt their temple. The Samaritans tried to help, but the upstanding Jews didn’t want the help of these disgusting half-breeds. So the Samaritans built their own temple. And their mutual disgust morphed into mutual hate.
- In 128 B.C. the Jews destroyed the Samaritan temple. About a century later the Samaritans defiled the Jewish temple by throwing the bones of dead people into it during the Feast of Passover. Think Christians burning mosques, and Muslims burning churches ... while the people are inside worshipping. Would that fire you up?!

- By the time of Philip, every day, in their synagogues, the Jews would curse the Samaritans and pray to God that no Samaritan would ever have any place in heaven. In other words, they can all go to hell. You see, the Jews hated the Samaritans, and the Samaritans hated the Jews.

Maybe that's why Jesus didn't just say, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea, and even to the ends of the earth." Maybe that's why he said – "I want you to be my witnesses to the Samaritans too ... even the Samaritans ... I want them too!"

Because here's the deal: we tend to drag our prejudices and our hatreds into our life with God. A lot of old soldiers carried their hatred of the "Japs" into their life with God. A lot of whites used to carry their hatred of blacks into their life with God. Some still do, I guess. Some people today carry their prejudices against Hispanics into their life with God. What prejudices did you carry into your life with God? Some form of sexism, or classism, or ageism? Maybe you direct yours towards people who are fat, or uneducated, or unenlightened? Whatever! Here it is: our prejudices will inevitably clash with our life with God. They don't belong there! They don't belong here! God has been trying to rip out our prejudices for millennia!

So, verse 14, "When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that the people of Samaria had accepted God's message, they sent Peter and John there." Remember, the apostles in Jerusalem were all Jews. In fact, all the earliest Jesus followers were Jews. They had grown up hating the Samaritans! And we drag our prejudices and our hatreds into our life with God, right? So, I suspect many of the earliest Jesus followers kind of hoped, still, that the Samaritans would all burn in hell! So they are like, "Say what?! Samaritans? Seriously? Accepting Jesus?!" And they sent two of their biggest guns to check it out. Do we have to ... accept ... them, too?!

And Peter and John were smart enough to let Jesus lead. So, verse 15: "As soon as they arrived, they prayed for these new believers to receive the Holy Spirit." Wow! You see, if God gave his Spirit to the Samaritans, that meant God was accepting them in. And Peter and John had been with Jesus. And they were smart enough to know that it is quite stupid to reject anyone God accepts. In fact, if you reject someone God accepts – if you reject someone God accepts -- it's kind of like you are rejecting God! You buy that? If we hold on to a prejudice or a hatred against someone God accepts, that kind of means we're squaring up against God! Which is ... pretty stupid!

And then there is this weird, weird little detail in verse 16. Luke says, “The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them, for they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.” In other words, Philip had already baptized these guys, but they didn’t have the Holy Spirit yet. Which is weird, because when you get baptized, the water is washing your outside, but the Spirit is washing your inside. That’s the norm: we’re not just baptized with water, we’re baptized with the Holy Spirit. So why was it different for these Samaritans?

Now, I’ve done a whole lot of study on these verses, and read a whole lot of great Christian teachers on these verses. And almost all of them say the same thing. Here it is: It’s kind of like God waited to give his Spirit to the Samaritans in a powerful way so that the apostles could see it, and so they could understand beyond any doubt, that these guys were in. He didn’t want anyone to miss it, he didn’t want any push back. God was blessing these Samaritans, and what God blesses, we don’t exclude. You see, this prejudice the Jews had against the Samaritans could have infected the church. But God was showing them that the walls had to come down. So, the apostles, Peter and John, laid their hands on the Samaritans, and somehow everyone knew they got the Holy Spirit, and they were in. And those God wants in, don’t you dare push out! Listen, if our Savior and Lord wants them in, I guess we need to figure out a way to crawl over the top of our prejudices, and even our hatreds, to invite them in. Now that’s hard! But Jesus says, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and even in Samaria Okay.

Well, there are some people who think that sharing Jesus with those you don’t like looks something like this: (*pics*)

- Turn or Burn! “Turn to Jesus, or burn in hell.” Or this one, “Turn or Burn ... Happy New Year!”
- Or for the more sophisticated: “Repent or perish.”
- Or do you like this guy’s t-shirt? “God hates U just the way you are.”

And they think they are doing what Jesus told them to do – being a witness, to the Samaritans. ... Guys that’s not being a witness. Being a witness is telling them who he is, and what he did for you. That’s not “gospel.” Do you know what “gospel” literally means? Gospel means, “good news,” “great news,” “the best news ever!” What part of that nonsense is good news? What part of that is, “Let me tell you what Jesus did for me, and Jesus can do that for you too!” The gospel is both truth and grace; it’s truth with grace; it’s the truth about grace. There’s no “turn or burn” in the gospel! ...

Now ... I saw this clip a long, long time ago, back when Penn and Teller were pretty big. Any of you old guys remember Penn and Teller? They were pretty good. Well, Penn Gillette was an atheist, back when it wasn't cool to be an atheist. Well, one time, after one of his shows, a very polite, very quiet, very gentle Jesus follower brought him a Gideon's Bible. And the way he shared Jesus was so powerful to Penn. Here's what Penn Gillette said ...

(Video Monologue – Centerscreen) “I've always said that I don't respect people who don't proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe that there's a heaven and a hell, and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life, and you think that it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward—and atheists who think people shouldn't proselytize and who say just leave me along and keep your religion to yourself—how much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? “I mean, if I believed, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that a truck was coming at you, and you didn't believe that truck was bearing down on you, there is a certain point where I tackle you. And this is more important than that.” That's way better than Turn or Burn, isn't it?

So here it is. Jesus says, “You shall be my witnesses ... even in Samaria.” Listen: you know how I've been saying that being a witness in Samaria is all about taking Jesus to those you don't like, and who don't like you? And you know how I've been saying that we tend to drag our prejudices and our hatreds into our Jesus following, and how they clash head on with our Jesus following? Listen: being a witness to an enemy is all about grace, it's all about forgiveness and grace. Either it's a sign that God's grace is healing you, or it's a sign that you get it ... that God's grace is for your enemies too. If there is some prejudice corrupting your soul, sharing Jesus with those you despise will put you in a spot where God can heal your twisted heart. If, on the other hand, you hate them for good reason, well, sharing Jesus is your act of forgiveness, it's your act of grace. And forgiving an enemy is one of the toughest, and most powerful things God asks us ... God commands us ... all of us ... to do.

Now sometimes it's just stupid prejudice. Our 'enemies' have really done nothing wrong. They were simply born the wrong color, or they live in the wrong place, or they like things you don't, or believe things you disagree with. And when Jesus says, “You will be – you will be – my witnesses to them too,” he's telling us to grow up, to knock it off, to get over it. There is no place for prejudice in the family of God. It's vile; it's a cancer; it drives God's precious kids away

from God, and it steals our peace and our joy. Sharing Jesus with those you despise unjustly ... well maybe God will use that to heal your twisted heart, too.

But sometimes they are enemies for good reason. They hate you, maybe. They've hurt you. They've hurt someone you love – that's even worse. They seem to stand for everything you stand against. They've done wrong, they don't ... deserve ... grace! As if grace ... is ever ... deserved ever. And sharing Jesus with those people, that's hard! But listen, listen: There is nothing you have ever done to make God love you less, and there is nothing you could ever do to make God love you more. God loves you as you are. And, God loves you way too much to let you stay as you are. Right? Well, here's the other side of that: There is nothing your enemy has ever done to make God love him less. And there is nothing your enemy could ever do to make God love her more. Jesus died for him too. Jesus wants to save her too. He loves them, just as they are ... go figure; but he loves them way too much to let them stay as they are. So he wants to reel them in ... through you!

And that is so hard, isn't it? Sometimes they are my enemies for good reason! They've done me wrong. Or they've done my family wrong. Or they've done my brothers and sisters wrong. They don't deserve forgiveness; they deserve justice. They should pay! God should make them pay! You see, we have this love affair with, and this hatred for ... grace. We love to get grace; but we hate to give it. We love it when God gives us what we don't deserve; but I'd hate it for God not to give my enemy exactly what he deserves, right? But ... God demands that those of us who have been graced, share it! That's what he means when he says, "You shall be my witnesses, even in Samaria."

So ... how do we do it? How do we get it done? How do we even get started? I'm going to give you four pieces. Every one of these is absolutely essential. (1) We start trying to look at our enemies through God's eyes. We have to remind ourselves that those people we hate are precious creatures of God. Every human being – every one of them – we created to be God's kid; to do life with God, for God, God's way. Every human being bears the ... "image of God." Created in God's image. Pretty messed up, but his image is under there somewhere.

You see, sometimes we start looking at people as a "nothing but," or a "no more than." "He's nothing but an animal." She's no more than a cheat and a liar." We shrink them to the size of their sin. We shrink them to the size of what they did to us. We no longer see them as they really are.

Well, being a Jesus witness starts with looking at your enemy through God's eyes: a human being, created in the image of God, meant to be a child of God. Twisted up, messed up – some way more than others. A confusing mixture of good and evil; a hodgepodge of meanness and decency; lies and truths. A broken man, or a broken woman, as desperate for God's grace as I am. That's how every one of your enemies looks to God, isn't it? Can we try to see them through God's eyes?

And then, (2) We give up our ... "right" ... to play God. We surrender our right to get even. We let God be God. Because he's good at it, and we're not. Have you ever uttered the blasphemy, "God may forgive him, but I never will!" The arrogance! The stupidity! Instead, how about leaving fairness and justice to God. How about we let him sort it all out. Because he's good at it, and we're not.

That's risky, isn't it? It's risky to give up our "right" to play God. Because God may not deal with our enemies the way we think he should. He might give grace to the one who hurt me, or mine. And there is nothing more sacred than my right to get back at the one who hurt me or mine, right? Nothing fairer, nothing sweeter, nothing more deserved. And when I am not capable of payback, I want God to make it right, right? And when we share Jesus, we are giving up our right to play God. I choose to "allow God" to give grace to whomever he wills ... as if he needs my permission.

So, One: We start looking at our enemies through God's eyes. Two: We give up our "right" to play God, and get even." And Three: We ask God's help mending our unforgiveness, our ungrace. We start this incredibly difficult journey from hatred to ... love ... when we share Jesus.

You see, what we felt before is just some variation of hate. We may disguise it, so we won't have to recognize it, or admit it, in ourselves. Here it is, guys: our prejudices and our hates reveal the untransformed parts of our heart. God's got work to do, on all of us. But we start this turn. We stop praying that God will get them, and start praying that God will help us want, to want them to find Jesus. We pray that God will help us want them to discover God's mercy, and his grace. And when you pray that, and when you start feeling the first inklings of grace inside you, you know God is doing something special, something healing, in you.

And then, Four, we share Christ. We are witnesses, even to the Samaritans. We tell them who he is. We tell them what he's done for us. We tell them he can do that for them too!

And if that enemy – when that enemy – starts loving on Jesus, you may need to fight back against your annoyance with God, and his grace. Really try to pray: “God, bless them, God heal them, God love on them ... this enemy of mine.” That can be a hard prayer, but it can be a healing prayer. You see, when you share Jesus with an enemy God will set a prisoner free. And then you'll discover that the prisoner God freed, is you.

So: Try to see your enemies with God's eyes. Surrender your supposed “right” to play God. Ask God to heal your ungrace. And then, share Jesus. Be a witness to his grace, even to the Samaritans. Guys, there is nothing more powerful than God transforming enemies into brothers and sisters. Has he done that for you? Has he done that through you?

We're going share the Lord's Supper together in just a moment. Have you ever pondered what a weird, weird thing this is we do? You don't deserve to be here. None of us do. No one here deserves to be here. No one here deserves to eat this bread and drink this cup. Guys, if any of you don't think you deserve to come to this table – you're right! You don't. But you are welcome here!

And look at these weird, weird people around you. People who often would be ... enemies ... in another place and time. And here we are, about to share Jesus together. To witness to Jesus together. Is there anyone you just wouldn't eat this meal with? Is there anyone who, if they stepped into your line, you'd step out? We got hammered on the social media once for letting some pretty notorious sinners, they thought, share the Lord's Supper with us. I guess they thought we should have some bouncers up here! Well we don't; and we won't. If you need some grace, and you want it from God through Jesus, you're welcome to come to the table ...