

*Love Takes a Detour*  
*Faith in Action ~ Week 1*  
*Luke 10:25-37*  
*March 30, 2008*

How do you feel when you see a detour sign?

I don't much like detours. I never say to myself, "Oh, good! I get to take a detour." Detours make me feel unsure and impatient. I like to know where I'm going. Detours usually mess up your schedule, interrupt your plans. And I like to have a plan and work my plan each day. I love to cross things off my 'to do' list. I don't have time for detours. Well, what if as you were driving along you saw two road signs — one said "Detour Ahead" and the other said, "Take Your Usual Route." And it was completely your choice. Which one would you take? Most of us would probably take our usual route — especially if we knew that the detour would cost us time, money, and personal frustration.

Today we begin our *Faith in Action* series. I'm very excited about what God is going to do in us and through us over these next 4 weeks as we think about how He is calling us to not only listen to His Word, but also do what it says.

Now, there are several components of the program:

- 1) **Sermons:** today, April 6 and 13
- 2) **Study groups that meet during Sunday School,** Tuesday afternoon and evening.
- 3) **Daily devotionals.** 28 Daily devotionals for the 4 weeks of this series. This book contains both the material you need for both the study groups and the daily devotions. You can pick them up in the Cove or at Sunday School today. **The daily devotionals start TODAY.**
- 4) ***Faith in Action* Day ~ April 20. Service opportunities ~ booklet**

Today our topic is detours. Not necessarily detours that you might encounter while driving; detours you encounter on the highway of life. Some detours in life come at you, and you *can't* choose to take your normal route — a child who gets into trouble, a layoff from your job, a spouse that has two heart attacks and bypass surgery. But there are other times in your life when you *do* have a choice to get off your normal path and take a detour — a detour that can help someone, a detour that will force you to put your faith into action. Are you the kind of person who will follow the sign that says "Take Your Usual Route" or will you follow the sign that says, "Detour Ahead?"

There's a rather famous person in the Bible who had this choice to make and decided to take the detour. You've probably heard of him. Whether you've ever read anything in the Bible or not, most everybody has heard of the "Good Samaritan." The story of the Good Samaritan is found in **Luke 10. Luke 10:25-28.**

At some point while Jesus is traveling around teaching and preaching, He encounters a person Luke calls an "expert in the Law." A lawyer. These lawyers were respected community leaders. They were professional interpreters of the Law of Moses, which is found in the first five books of the Old Testament. These lawyers were responsible for explaining the requirements of the Law to ordinary people. In this encounter between Jesus and the lawyer, Luke says that the lawyer had an underlying motive. Luke tells us that his motive was to test Jesus.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The lawyer was trying to show the crowd that Jesus couldn’t handle a tough theological question. But rather than answer his question, Jesus gives the test back to the expert. Jesus asks him, “What is written in the law? How do *you* read it?” In other words, Jesus says, *you’re* the expert; how do *you* answer the question?” Well, the lawyer just can’t resist the temptation to show off his theological sophistication. So 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 shows a lot of insight, so Jesus the Teacher commends him for it: “You’re right. You get an A+ for that answer.” But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He also says “*Do* this and you will live.”

Jesus is saying here that it isn’t enough to *know* the right answer, you must *do* it. It’s not enough just to *know* what’s in here. It’s not enough to go to Bible study. It’s not enough to read the Bible every day or even to memorize large portions of Scripture. That’s all good. But eventually you have to go out into the real world and put into practice what you *know* of *this*. *Knowing* what the Bible says won’t change you and it won’t change the world around you. For that to happen, you have to be willing to *do something* about what you know.

Now let’s look at the next verse. Again, I want you to notice the motive behind the question. This is key to the meaning of the rest of this passage. **Luke 10:29**. In characteristic lawyer fashion, he wants to defend himself by narrowly defining a word. “Okay, love my neighbor as myself. Well, how do you define ‘neighbor’? Who is my neighbor?” The classic understanding of “neighbor” by the Jews at that time was pretty similar to what ours would be – “one who is near” – near in terms of race and religion. To the lawyer “love your neighbor” meant love those of your own race and religion. In other words: love those who are like you.

Luke tells us that the lawyer wanted to ‘justify’ himself. He wanted to justify loving only those who were like him. He wanted an excuse not to have to love those whom he deemed to be unlovable or unworthy. On his deathbed, W.C. Fields was found reading the Bible, and when asked why, he said this: “I’m looking for loopholes.” I think we do this, too. Especially when we encounter something in the Bible that is difficult for us, or demands something we don’t really want to give, or asks us to do something we don’t want to do, we go looking for Scripture that will tell us how little we can do and still be okay with God. We look for the minimum we can do and still meet God’s demands. You see, this desire to justify himself isn’t just the lawyer’s problem. It’s our problem. We try to justify ourselves for doing as little as possible to help others. We have lots of excuses. We tell ourselves (and God!) that we can’t help someone because it’s too dangerous, or too complicated, or too time-consuming, or it will cost too much money. Sometimes we tell ourselves that helping someone really won’t help them in the long run, but will only reinforce bad choices they’ve made.

The parable of the “Good Samaritan” isn’t just about, “We should help people in need.” The parable is also about excuses. It’s about self-justification. Okay, back to our story. Wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asks Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” **Luke 10:30-33**.

Notice the cast of characters: We have a group of robbers. We have a man who gets robbed and beaten so badly that he is half dead. Then we have the three main characters. The first is a **priest**. The office of priest in Israel was of supreme importance and high rank. Priests

represented the people before God, and offered the various sacrifices required by the Law. Then there is a **Levite**. Levites weren't quite as honored as the priests, but they were nonetheless a privileged group in society. They were responsible for everything that took place in the Temple. Now the third character in the story is a big surprise. Jesus says a **Samaritan** came. A priest, a Levite, a Samaritan. Now, just so we understand, that's like saying, there's Papa Bear, Mama Bear and a skunk.

Samaritans were despised by Jews. Some 700 years earlier, Israel had been invaded by Assyria. After tens of thousands of Jews were exiled, the Jews that remained in Israel and the foreigners that moved in lived together, had children and became a new people. Their descendents were the Samaritans of Jesus' time. They believed in the Law of Moses, but they worshipped at Mt. Gerizim rather than in Jerusalem. The Jews considered them half-breeds and heretics. The racial and religious contempt between these two groups was intense and sometimes even violent.

**Luke 10:33-37.** The Samaritan chose to get off his usual route. He took a divine detour. And there were lots of good reasons, lots of very reasonable excuses he could have used to just continue on by like the priest and the Levite did. For one thing, **this detour took a RISK**. The 17-mile road from Jerusalem to Jericho was known to be incredibly dangerous. Because of the number of robbers along this road, it was known as "The Way of Blood." The priest and the Levite knew they were on a dangerous road. They were probably on their way to do some important work for God. And to touch a dead body, come into contact with blood, meant they would become 'unclean,' and therefore, unable to do their ministry for some period of time. That's a pretty good excuse for not taking the detour. There was a significant risk involved. When the Samaritan stopped to help, he knew he was on a dangerous road. Maybe he even thought that the robbers might still be around, and that they might get him next. But the Samaritan didn't use risk as an excuse not to act.

Sometimes we justify not helping someone in need because we are afraid of the risk to us. Now, certainly there are times when taking a risk is just not smart. But 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 this about this story: "The first question the priest and the Levite asked was: 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But...the Samaritan reversed the question: 'If I *do not* stop to help this man, what will happen to *him*?'” If we are going to love our neighbors, we can't use risk as an excuse to hold back.

**This detour also took PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT.** Sometimes our excuse for not helping someone is that we don't want to get personally involved. The Samaritan did not use that excuse. He didn't just call 911 or phone the pastor to get involved. He didn't just write a check. His compassion moved him to action. He got in the ditch with the man. He got close and bandaged his wounds. *He* probably came out of the ditch looking dirty and bloody, too.

One of the reasons we don't want to get personally involved in helping people is that it takes time. And let's face it, none of us have enough time. But here's the thing: **Divine detours usually take TIME.** I had a day this week that I had all planned out – like most of my days are – but it didn't go the way I planned. There were detours. People who needed me who I hadn't planned for. And so, I had a choice: to stick with my plan – which was a good plan, by the way,

and which included lots of good stuff, necessary stuff, stuff you pay me to do, stuff I need to do – I had to make the choice to stick with **my plan, take my usual route, OR take the divine detours** God was putting before me. Sometimes we use our busy schedules to justify not helping people in need. In fact, this may be the most common excuse of them all. The Samaritan didn't use his busy schedule as an excuse not to help. He stopped, and then he slowed his progress even further by putting the man on his donkey. There wasn't an emergency room where the Samaritan could take the man. Instead, he took him to a motel and cared for the man himself that night. When it comes to helping those in need and loving our neighbors, the greatest ability we often have is our availability! If you are going to love your neighbors, don't use time or your schedule as an excuse to hold back.

And **this detour took MONEY**. Sometimes we justify not helping those in need because it is going to cost us money. The Samaritan did not use this as an excuse. He gave the innkeeper the equivalent of two days' wages. And then he said that he would take care of any extra expenses once he returned. And you know how expensive those little mini-bar items can be! Margaret Thatcher once said, "No one would have remembered the Good Samaritan if he'd only had good intentions. He had money as well." Not only did the Samaritan *have* money, he was willing to spend it to help this poor stranger. Many times it will take money to help your neighbor in need. If you are going to love your neighbor, don't use money as an excuse to hold back.

In answer to the lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus asked one of His own: "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him. Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." Jesus changed the focus of the question from "Who is my neighbor?" to "What kind of neighbor are you?"

So that's the hard question for us today, church: What kind of neighbor are you? What kind of neighbors are we? Our spiritual journey calls us beyond managing our to-do lists and making our excuses into a faith-in-action lifestyle that welcomes and responds to divine detours—opportunities to demonstrate God's love to people in need. *Divine detours*. As we like to say around here – you go nowhere by accident.

Please attend one of our *Faith in Action* study groups, either this morning or this week. Locations, times, and leaders are in the insert. You'll have the opportunity to continue this discussion with others about the detours we often need to take if we're going to help those who are in need.

This week I challenge you to get off your usual road and take a detour. It doesn't have to even be anything big. Visit someone in the hospital. Take a plate of spaghetti to a widow or widower in your neighborhood. Sit and visit with them. Offer to baby-sit for a single mom. Write a letter to a soldier overseas. Sponsor a child in an impoverished country. Take a divine detour. Love your neighbor. Put your faith into action.