

A few weeks ago, 7 of our youth, along with their 7 mentors, launched into Confirmation, or as I like to put it, they set out for a hike in the woods. They lit out the backdoor of the house without telling mom where they were going.

My friend Mike and I used to do this all the time when we were boys. I'll be back, I'd tell my mom. And she'd say, okay, just make sure you stick together. Never did she warn us not to wander too close to the train tracks. Never did she tell us about the dangers of poison ivy. Never did she warn us where not to go. She was glad to give us her blessing to go exploring.

We'd come back 4 or 5 hours later, with dirt smudges on our jeans, sometimes soaking wet from having fallen into a pond, but always with a story to tell about our adventures. Of course, the best adventures were also the worst adventures, because they were the ones where we'd get lost. Out walking through the woods for so long, no path, just a couple of bushwhackers thinking the whole time that we knew the direction we were headed in, until Mike or I would say, “Do you know where we are?” One of us would suggest a way to go, the other would suggest a different way to go, and after doing this 6 or 7 more times, we'd finally re-emerge from the woods. “Where have you been?” my other would ask. “Oh, you're not going to believe it! We must have gone 10 miles! We got lost and thought we'd never find our way home.” And we'd do our best to describe where we'd been. “There was a grove of pine trees that went on forever and suddenly an open field and a pile of rusty old cars sitting in the middle of it.” And my mother, who had grown up playing in those same woods would just smile and say, “You weren't lost. In fact, you weren't even far from home.”

“We weren't?” And she'd take us out and show us a different way to get to the place we'd just come from, and seeing that place with her, it was like seeing it for the first time. Suddenly, it didn't scare us anymore.

That's what confirmation is. It's stepping into the wooded world of faith with someone who has maybe been there before; someone who has asked our questions and maybe come up with an answer, or who at least is willing to say, “Great question. Let's ask it together.” Who is God? Is God good, because if God is good, who are those people over

there, why are their lives such a mess and why isn't God helping them? What does it mean to be a Christian? If Catholics are Christians and Baptists are Christians and my friend Sally who never goes to church but calls herself a Christian is a Christian, then what's a Christian? If Jesus is the way to heaven, does that mean Muslims and Hindus and atheists aren't going to heaven? Because Jesus doesn't seem like someone who wouldn't let people into heaven. What is the Bible? Who wrote it, is it true and if so, who says? And what do its thousands of pages all come down to?

This last question is the one I put to our confirmands and their mentors last Sunday when we met for our second group session. After asking each of them to make a timeline of their own life (which was easier for Ryan Stevenson who is 12 than it was for Phil Avenia who is... Well, never mind), I then asked them to describe their timeline in a series of themes. Age 5 to 8 was happy. Age 10 to 13 was weird. Age 16 was eye-opening. Age 40 to 50 was scary. After doing this, I asked the group to write down what they know about some of the people, places, and themes we find in the Bible. Here's the paper with some of our answers. In the Bible we meet Luke, Noah, Matthew, Sarah, Ezekiel, Bathsheba, and Saul who later becomes Paul. The stories happen in cities, by seashores, on high mountain tops and in low valleys. And finally, the theme of the Bible is forgiveness, love, condemnation, perseverance, death, creation, re-creation, faith. In other words, I told the group, the Bible is a story about us, and our lives.

Take for a moment our Gospel story for this morning: The Good Samaritan. This is probably one of the most familiar stories in the Bible. In fact, it's so familiar that even if you don't know it's a story from the Bible, you probably still know it. What should strike us about this story, however, is that for as familiar as we are with it, for as much as we might say it's a story about us, it's a story about the totally unfamiliar.

I won't recount all the details for us. Ed read them for us already, and even if he hadn't, we know them. A man gets beat up. Two people you'd expect to stop and help him, don't. While a third person, a Samaritan no one would expect to stop and help, does. And which of the three do you say was the good neighbor? And we say, the Samaritan. Be like the Samaritan. End of story. Except what we forget is that we are nothing like the Samaritan, and this story doesn't start out as a story about neighborliness. It starts out as a

story about a much weightier matter, when a lawyer stands up to ask Jesus, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Well this isn’t a multiple-choice question at all, is it? Of all the important questions we could ask—of all the questions we don’t want to get wrong—is there one more important than this one: what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Luke says it’s a lawyer who poses the question to Jesus, and like some lawyers, this one doesn’t actually want an answer to his question. He just like to hear himself talk. Both he and Jesus know, this lawyer already has the answer to his own question. “What do you read in the law,” Jesus asks him. “You’re a lawyer. You want eternal life. You tell me, what’s the law say?” And sure enough, this lawyer rattles off the right answer: love God with everything you’ve got and love your neighbor with everything you’ve got.

“That’s right. Do this and you will live.”

“But who is my neighbor?” the lawyer presses. Again, this is not a question of curiosity by this lawyer. Luke says he’s asking only in an effort to justify himself. He’s doesn’t need Jesus to tell him who is neighbor is. This lawyer believes he already knows exactly who is neighbor is, and that he’s already doing a perfect job loving his neighbor, and won’t it be great to hear Jesus tell him so, to hear Jesus say, “Eternal life? You want eternal life? You know, you love your neighbor so well, I think you’ve got it already.”

Jesus however, knows what this lawyer is not willing to admit, that eternal life—like eternal joy, eternal hope, eternal love, eternal blessedness—eternal life is not something we can get by following a law or even by loving our neighbor. You can’t work for it, because it’s not for sale. You can only receive it. To make his point, Jesus tells the all too familiar story about the traveler, who going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho one day, gets jumped by a band of robbers. They beat him, strip him of his clothes and money, and leave him for dead. Just then, along comes a Levite and a priest. They see the man lying there, half-naked and bleeding, but like the lawyer, they too know something about the law, and the part that says, “Do not touch blood or you will be ritually unclean.” We can’t afford to get mixed up with this mess, they tell themselves. You see, they’re on their way to a worship service in Jerusalem and they know they won’t be allowed in if they have blood on their hands. So they cross to the other side of the street and continue on their way.

Meanwhile, along comes a Samaritan. Now the Samaritan also knows what the law says, but the Samaritan also knows that he would never be let into a worship service anyway. To a priest and Levite, a Samaritan is like the step-child of the family. They belong to the family, but they got in only because someone else brought them along, and no one really likes the Samaritan. The Samaritan believes in God, but not like everyone else. The Samaritan worships God, but not like everyone else. The Samaritan lives in town, but not in the part with everyone else. Today, Samaritans would be living in Iraq, and would most likely be Muslims, not Christians. Yet, in our story today—in our Bible!—they are the ones Jesus calls neighbor. They are the unfamiliar character who comes from out nowhere to save the story from going under. They are the ones who stand in a world bloodied and bruised to give witness to mercy. The ones of whom Jesus says, “Go, and do likewise.”

I’ll end with this one story. At my church in Virginia, where I started out in ministry, we had a preschool, and every Wednesday I got to sit down in the sanctuary and tell them a Bible story. Whenever possible, and to spice things up a bit, I would always ask the children to play along in helping me to tell the story, and I’ll never forget what happened the day we got together to tell the tale of the Good Samaritan.

“Okay,” I told the group, “in this story there is a traveler who one day goes for a walk down the road. “Can someone be our traveler and walk along our road?” which was a piece of masking tape I had put down on the floor. “And along the road came a robber who kicked and punched the traveler and pushed them to the ground,” and I figured tons of kids would want to play the robber and get to pretend to kick and punch the poor traveler. But when I asked for volunteers, no one raised their hand. So finally, I picked little Makenzie who—bless her heart—said, “I’ll be the robber but I won’t kick and punch.”

“But you have to,” I told her. “That’s how the story goes.”

“I don’t want to be in this story then.”

As for the Levite and priest, I got two other kids to fill those roles. “And along came a priest and a Levite, but when they saw the traveler lying on the ground hurting, they moved to the other side of the street.” And they moved to the other side of the masking tape line and totally ignored the traveler. Perfect job, I told them. But then we got to the part of the story where it says, “And the Samaritan, the Samaritan helped the traveler up,”

and suddenly our priest and Levite, all of 4 years old, rushed back onto the scene to help the Samaritan help the traveler up. “No, no,” I told them. “That’s not how the story goes.”

“But why not?” they all asked in unison.

I tell you, I am not here this morning to give you eternal life. I am not here to tell you how you can overcome all your heartaches and hardships, and some of you have had more than a few. I am not here to tell you what is or is not politically and theologically correct, or even to tell you the truth about anything. I am here to do one thing and one thing only: to give witness to mercy. To tell you that today, God is crossing over to where you are. Into your world of death and doubt, to touch your bloodied and bruised heart, to lift you, to carry you, to rejoice over you, to give you back to life. Amen.