

The Love of God and the Love of Neighbor

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But wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”
Luke 10:29

Here is a thing that happened among neighbors....

On the evening of July 24, 1967, H. Rap Brown, then only twenty-three years old, stood on the hood of a car on Pine Street in the small town of Cambridge, Maryland, and made a speech remembered to this day. July, 1967 was in the middle of what has been called the “Long Hot Summer,” a season of racial disturbances that rippled across America, and on that steamy July night, tensions were high. Just a month earlier, over a thousand protesters in Cincinnati, enraged by what they considered an unjust criminal verdict against a black man, had overturned cars, looted stores, and shattered windows. Scarcely a week before, four days of rioting had left two dozen dead in Newark, New Jersey, and the very night Brown spoke in Cambridge, civil unrest rocked inner-city Detroit with nearly 500 fires set and almost 2,000 people arrested.

Pine Street was the main artery in Cambridge’s Second Ward, the heart of the town’s African American community. Brown, newly elected as chairman of the national Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, had been invited to town by a local civil rights group, and he spoke passionately that night to several hundred residents about black power and white oppression. Brown derided “white honkies,” attacked the police, landlords, and the federal government, and at the crescendo of his address shouted, “Like I said in the beginning, if this town don’t come around, this town should be burned down!”¹

Late that night, the all-black Pine Street Elementary School, directly across from where Brown spoke, mysteriously caught fire. To this day, no one knows who set it or why. The local (and all-white) volunteer fire department refused desperate calls for help from the terrified residents and let the school burn. A lifelong resident of Pine Street, who was a boy in 1967, remembers as if it were yesterday that terrible moment when the flames in the schoolhouse gathered their fury and, like a malevolent yellow-orange tiger, leapt upward and then outward across Pine Street, ferociously consuming buildings and houses on the other side. By dawn, two square blocks in the heart of Cambridge’s Second Ward were smoldering embers.

Pine Street had been a proud and busy commercial area with grocery stores, night clubs, pool halls, auto garages, laundries, funeral homes, and other businesses. Locals bragged that Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald had once performed in music halls on Pine Street, an avenue so vibrant it was dubbed the “Black Wall Street of the Eastern Shore.” But on that one agonizing night in 1967, homes, businesses, and centers of cultural life were lost to the devastation. In the months after the fire, local banks consistently refused loans to rebuild, and now, a half century later, the Pine Street community—indeed the whole town of Cambridge—still bears the scars and has never fully recovered.

About these facts, all the neighbors in Cambridge agree. But out of the ashes of Cambridge's Second Ward over fifty years ago, two very different and tenacious stories have emerged. We could call them the "Race Street Story" and the "Pine Street Story," or more simply, the white story and the black story.

In 1967, Race Street (named after a mill race that once ran beside the street) was the main thoroughfare in white Cambridge, a counterpart to the neighboring Pine Street a block away. Race Street, too, had a collection of busy shops, theaters, churches, and restaurants. Race Street, too, was a center of commercial and social life on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. The story told on Race Street for five decades now, in barber shops and beauty salons, in bars and at Sunday dinner tables, and over cones and banana splits at the ice cream parlor, was that there had been a "race riot" in Cambridge in 1967, just like the ones in Newark and Detroit. H. Rap Brown's incendiary rhetoric had roused the residents of the Second Ward, and they responded with turmoil in the streets. Fires were set, guns were discharged, businesses were looted. Yes, the volunteer fire department refused to go to the Pine Street fire, but that was because of the very reasonable fear they would be shot by black snipers. The second ward was so out of control, goes the story, that finally, then Maryland Governor Spiro T. Agnew called for Brown's arrest for inciting a riot and was forced to request intervention by the National Guard to restore order to the town.

That's how they tell the story on Race Street. On Pine Street, they tell a vastly different narrative. There was no "race riot." After Brown's speech, they say, young white men drove recklessly through the Second Ward firing guns, but eventually they stopped. Teenagers, white and black, roamed the area for a few hours tossing firecrackers and hurling taunts, but that too subsided. Someone started a small fire at the school, but the local residents quickly put it out, and soon the excitement was over and the residents of Pine Street, for the most part, went to bed.

The real trouble began later that night. Another small fire was started at the school, and according to the Pine Street Story, no one in the black community would have done that. Pine Street Elementary was the pride of the neighborhood. It must have been whites who torched the school. When the fire department was called, the flames were still manageable, but numerous pleas for help were ignored. Even when Charles Cornish, the Second Ward councilman, called, his appeal was dismissed. "One lousy truck," said a Pine Street resident, was all that was needed.²

Cambridge Police Chief Brice Kinnamon said that he refused to order the fire department to respond because there was rioting in the Second Ward, and the firemen would have been risking their lives. But the way the story is told on Pine Street, there was no rioting and little reason to fear. In fact, the electric company had utility workers on Pine Street that night cutting the power lines ahead of the fire, and they faced no trouble. Reporters were wandering the streets of the Second Ward without incident.³ What actually happened was that a newscaster had taken a tape of Brown's speech to police headquarters and played it for officials. When Kinnamon heard it, he erupted into rage, grabbed a rifle, and shouted in fury, "We're going to get every son of a bitch down there....I don't give a damn if the entire Second Ward burns!"⁴ So, the fire department did not come, and Pine Street burned, not because of peril but because of racist rage.

Sometime after 2:30 a.m., when the Maryland Attorney General, roused from his bed in Annapolis and summoned to Cambridge, commandeered a fire truck and

ordered it to the scene, the residents of Pine Street pitched in with buckets and hoses, but it was too late. Merchant Hansel Greene, a prominent and respected citizen of Pine Street, watched his grocery business burn and invited his neighbors to rescue perishables from the store. When they did, the police later reported them as looters. A week after the fire, a despairing Greene, having lost his store, his confidence, and his livelihood, took his own life.⁵

For five decades, these two stories have been told: the Race Street Story and the Pine Street Story. The two streets run parallel to each other only a few hundred yards apart, neighbors really, but the shadow of the summer of 1967 falls between them, forming to this day an invisible but virtually impenetrable barrier. One community of neighbors; two stories, a great chasm.

Not Abstraction, but Hard Reality

When Jesus was with his disciples out on the road, he encountered a lawyer who, for whatever reason, wanted to stop Jesus in his tracks. He tried, as Luke reports, “to put Jesus to the test,” that is, to put Jesus on trial, as lawyers are wont to do. He feigned humility, standing up to speak to Jesus. In the ancient world, teachers sat and students stood, and taking the posture of a student, the lawyer asked his “innocent student” question: what must a person do to “inherit eternal life,” or, in other words, how should one live to be in full and deep communion with the life of God? Good question.

Jesus suggested that the Torah might be a good resource for a question like that and wondered how the lawyer himself, trained in textual matters after all, read those documents. There may be a barb in Jesus’s challenge (“*You’re* the fancy lawyer; how do *you* read the law?”), but mainly Jesus is implying that the answer to this, one of life’s deepest questions, is not a matter of innovation, but life-giving interpretation: “You and I are coming from the same heritage. I’m not making up some new religion here. We both share the teaching of Moses. How do you read the tradition?” The lawyer responded by putting together two verses from the law, one from Deuteronomy and the other from Leviticus: “You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself” (Lk 10:27).

“Good!” said Jesus, “Right answer. Do this, and you will live” (Lk 10:25-28).

Now, some scholars think that the lawyer did not just pull this “love of God, love of neighbor” formula out of thin air. Jesus had been preaching and teaching it everywhere, and the lawyer knew that. He simply mirrored back Jesus’s own sermon text in order to zero in on the place where he considered Jesus vulnerable: his definition of “neighbor.”⁶ But even as the lawyer pressed forward with his case, he was now unsettled, sensing that something had shifted in the exchange. The lawyer was aiming to put Jesus on trial...but wait a minute...now it seemed like the courtroom has reversed, and he himself was in the docket, he himself was on trial. Maybe it was that last phrase Jesus said, “Do this, and you will live,” as if Jesus were implying that he *wasn’t* doing this, that *he* wasn’t fully alive, that he was somehow *incomplete*. Was Jesus saying, “You got the answer right, Buster, now practice what you preach”? Whatever it was, the lawyer was now on the defensive, transformed from interrogator into interrogated, from prosecuting attorney to shackled defendant, needing to justify himself.

So, he posed a second question: “And who is my neighbor?” (Lk 10:29). Interesting, isn’t it, that, in his self-justification, the lawyer asked about the “love your neighbor” part but not about the “love the Lord, your God” piece. Maybe this was because he thought the “love your God” part of his life was in order. Or maybe he thought no one who knew his public standing could challenge his love of God. How, after all do you question a man’s love for God when the man knows the scripture so well, goes to worship regularly, makes his offerings in due course, and frequently sings with the psalmist, “Oh, how I love your law. It is my meditation all day long” (Ps 119:97)? It was his love of neighbor, perhaps, not his love of God, that demanded public evidence and needed justifying.

Or, one more possibility. Maybe the lawyer, no fool after all, sensed how deeply the love of God and the love of neighbor are connected in the Torah, that love of God and love of neighbor are not two categories but two sides of a single commandment, two parts of an integrated life. Perhaps the lawyer already anticipated what the writer of 1 John would say later, that those who claim to love God but who do not love those closest to them are liars: “For those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also” (1 John 4:20-21).

So, the stakes were high for the lawyer right on the issue of the love of neighbor. Not to love one’s neighbor is tantamount to not loving God, so best get clear about the definition of “neighbor.” Whatever the reason and motivation for his question, the lawyer is on to something. If we figure out the character and scope of the love of neighbor, we will have discovered much about the love of God.

Significantly, Jesus did not respond with an abstract definition, but with a story, a parable, involving a concrete situation between neighbors. What is more, Jesus’s story was no softball case in neighborly ethics. He did not say, “Once upon a time there was a neighborhood garden association arguing about whether to put pansies or petunias in the planter at the gate. Tempers flared, but then they realized, ‘Hey we’re all just people, and neighbors after all!’ And after having a good laugh, they embraced each other and had a glass of wine. Go and do likewise.” No, Jesus picks the hardest case imaginable in his setting, the case of Jew and Samaritan, his own culture’s version of Race Street and Pine Street.

It is in the hard cases, the places where the very concept of “neighbor” has been ground away by fear, misunderstanding, and hatred, where the possibility of the love of neighbor is at deepest risk, and it is in the hard cases where the gospel idea of loving neighbor truly takes form. “You want to know who your neighbor is?” responded Jesus to the lawyer. “Well, let’s skip the *Dictionary of Ethics* for a moment and go right down to the dusty and perilous road from Jerusalem to Jericho, where Jews and Samaritans, the clean and the unclean, law abiders and robbers, homeboys and foreigners, us and them cross each other’s path.”

It is right here that we must caution ourselves as Christian preachers. One of our sharpest temptations is to hydroplane into idealized, universalized abstraction. Here comes this prickly, authoritarian, legalistic lawyer, we preach, trying to box Jesus in, attempting to force him to draw exclusive lines around the idea of neighbor, forcing him to say, “Well, your neighbor is your fellow Jew, or your relatives, or the people of your tribe.” If he had done that, we say, then the lawyer could have chirped with

justified self-satisfaction, like the Rich Ruler (Luke 18:18-25), “Well, all of these I have loved since my youth.”⁷ But we go on to say, Jesus refused to be boxed in, refused to limit the idea of “neighbor.” Instead, like some precocious Protestant hippie, he smiled gently, raised his eyes heavenward, and said, “Oh no. *Everyone* is our neighbor. We must be inclusive and love all human beings.”

This kind of abstraction is actually one of the best ways to step around and avoid a Christian understanding of love of neighbor since it leaps in a single bound over the hard and particular cases. I love every member of the American Automobile Association because I know, theologically, that each one of them is created in the image of God. It’s the very particular and non-abstract guy riding my bumper right now, blowing his horn and thrusting obscene gestures in my direction who throws me into road rage. I have often said that I want an “inclusive” church, one that makes no distinctions among people and maintains no barriers to keep “the other” away. But, of course, I mean the *safe* “other,” the “other” that my enlightened faith has already accepted—the LGBTQI community, the homeless, the immigrant. I do not mean the jagged-edged “other”—the Klansman, the skinhead, the alt-right tycoon, and the guy with the NRA sticker on his jacked-up, knobby tired truck. I am glad my church is out in front on women’s issues, and I am pleased that, from my own congregation, a busload of members wearing those pink hats went to the Women’s March on Washington, but I am just as pleased, when I am passing the peace in worship on Sunday, not to have to clasp my hand of blessing around the hand of Ann Coulter or Laura Ingraham. Virtually every Christian I know in my set firmly believes “loving your neighbor as yourself” means breaking down barriers of race, class, gender, and so on, but I have seen so many of us pull back the reins when it comes time for *our* child to go to *that* neighborhood school. Love of neighbor in the abstract often trips over the tough situation, the hard call, and the real neighbor. Yes, the gospel eventually arrives at the peak place where all human beings are seen as our neighbors, but it gets there only by passing through the valley of actual cases and hard choices.

Jesus, therefore, will not let us make an abstraction of the love of neighbor. “Neighbor” is not a vague ethical principle to Jesus; “neighbors” are real and challenging persons with whom any possible relationships have to be painstakingly worked through. So Jesus takes us right down to reality, right into the ‘hood, directly into the most painful and challenging place imaginable—to the block between Pine Street and Race Street, to the Jericho Road where Jew encounters Samaritan.

Breakthroughs

The great Jewish thinker Martin Buber is well known for his “I-Thou” relational theology in which true human flourishing is found not in individualism, existentialism, or turned-in-on-itself psychologism, but outwardly in dialogue, relationship, and covenant with others, that is, in the true love of neighbor. It is important to see that by “I-Thou,” Buber meant both the human-divine relationship and human-human relationships. The two relational dimensions were, for Buber, intertwined. Our relationship to the “Other” was mirrored by and mingled with our relation to the “other,” or to put it in New Testament terms, the love of God and the love of neighbor are inescapably interrelated.

But how does this interaction between the two loves—God and neighbor—happen? At one point in his writing, Buber became concerned that in order to make his ideas

clear, he had inadvertently used examples and illustrations that were too abstract, too “pure,” as he put it, and he hastened to clarify, to make it plain that he did not have lovely abstractions in mind but instead muddled, conflicted, compromised and utterly realistic relationships where “breakthroughs” nonetheless can happen. “But I am not concerned with the pure,” Buber wrote. “I am concerned with the turbid, the repressed, the pedestrian, with toil and dull contrariness—and with the breakthrough.”⁸

Buber was saying two things, both of which connect to Jesus’s teaching. First, Buber was saying that our relationships to each other (and our relationship to God as well) are never as crystalline and lovely as sappy Hollywood movies make them out to be or as optimistic sermon illustrations portray them. To the contrary, says Buber, they are always quite ordinary, pedestrian, and often tedious and boring on the one hand, and yet vexed and sullied by confusion, denial, and conflict on the other. In short, Buber is not talking about relationships between neighbors in Camelot; he has his eye on realistic human relationships that take place in the troubled places like Berlin in the 1930s, the Middle East in Buber’s last years in Israel, and Pine Street and Race Street today—or, as Jesus would say, down on that ordinary, pedestrian, tedious, and conflict-riddled road from Jerusalem to Jericho—that is, the hard places where dialogue is fraught with peril and potential failure.

Nevertheless—and this is the second thing Buber says that connects to Jesus—our “neighborly” relationships are the places where “breakthroughs” can and do happen. As he says, “I am concerned with the turbid, the repressed, the pedestrian, with toil and dull contrariness—and with the breakthrough.”

“Breakthrough” is just the right word for Jesus’s story of the Good Samaritan. Sometimes parables scholars quibble about whether this story is really a parable at all.⁹ Maybe, some say, it is merely an “example story.” There’s a guy in trouble beside the road, and three people come by. Two people don’t help, but the third shows mercy. Two bad examples followed by a good one; so, pay attention to the good one and imitate it. Simple as that. Go and do likewise.

But what this “example story” notion overlooks and what makes Jesus’s story so outrageous, what makes it *parabolic* is that we do not merely have three examples, three generic guys who happen down the road. We have two Jews and one very big surprise, a despised Samaritan. Assuming that the man who is hurt beside the road is himself a Jew, the fact that it is the Samaritan who is “moved with pity” (Luke 10:33), the fact that it is he and not a member of wounded man’s own tribe who shows mercy, is a game-changer, a world-reversing earthquake.

The Samaritan and what he does in the story is a jagged piece that tears through the fabric of an assumed world that never changes, a world in which Jericho Roads, Pine Streets, and Race Streets are never places of healing and hope because they forever get traveled by people who inhabit the same neighborhood but who are, because of history, hatred, distrust, bigotry, and just plain human cussedness, always and definitively not neighborly.

But what happened when the Samaritan interrupted his turbid, pedestrian, and dully contrarian routine to bend over the wounded man with flasks of oil and wine was an interruption of this hopelessness, one that causes ethical whiplash, and this is what Buber called a *breakthrough*.

Breakthroughs come as surprises, like a thief in the night. Breakthroughs in human relationships happen when, improbably, the normal hostility that marks the bound-

ary between neighbors is reversed, when the walls between people suddenly come down, and when neighbors see neighbors for who they truly are and act accordingly. Perhaps it is just for a moment, but in that moment we glimpse not just a piece of odd behavior, but another world. And for Buber, this is more than a horizontal experience of human compassion, even more than a matter of human history being overtaken and overridden by God, but instead a sign of the intermingling of divine and human action: “It is not man’s own power that works here, nor is it God’s pure effective passage, but it is a mixture of the divine and the human. He who is sent out in the strength of revelation takes with him, in his eyes, an image of God; however, far this exceeds the senses, yet he takes it with him in the eye of the spirit, in that visual power of his spirit which is not metaphorical but wholly real....But the event that from the side of the world is called reversal is called from God’s side salvation.”¹⁰

From the point of view of the world, a breakthrough is called a “reversal,” but from the divine perspective, the same breakthrough is called “salvation.” That, by the way, is what the best Christian preachers down through the centuries have said about the parable of the Good Samaritan. Yes, this parable shows human power at work. The good Samaritan was not a puppet; he was a man who felt compassion, a man who at much risk stopped his journey and showed mercy to a wounded man who, on ordinary days, would have rejected him as the alien. As a human being and of his own volition, he showed surprising mercy and love to the man in need. He is truly an ethical model.

But, if he’s only a good example to be emulated, the Good Samaritan will not move the needle on human enmity one whit. He’s merely the exception that proves the sad rule. So, these great preachers go on to say that the compassion of the Samaritan wasn’t all that was happening out there on that Jericho Road. There was far more going on than simply one human being showing mercy to another. When the Samaritan bent down over the wounded neighbor with the flasks of oil and wine, it was not just a Samaritan but also Jesus Christ himself. As Augustine once preached, Christ, who is ultimately the Samaritan, “healed us, ...raised us upon His beast, upon His flesh; He led us to the inn, that is, the Church; He entrusted us to the host....He gave two pence, whereby we might be healed, the love of God, and the love of our neighbor.”¹¹ Gathered up into this act of ethical reversal, if one knows how to look, one can see God’s salvation, too.

The Impossible Possibility

Let’s get to the point. Loving our neighbors—our real neighbors, the ones who come at us with jagged edges—is ethically and humanly impossible. There is simply too much history, too many layers of deception and bitterness, too much at risk. But with God, all things are possible, and it takes an act of God—it takes an experience of the love of God—before the love of neighbor can take place. To put it bluntly, no one can love the neighbor who has not been lifted out of the ditch by the love of God. Loving neighbor is not a matter of good intentions or correct ethics—presumably the lawyer, the priest, and the Levite in Luke 10 had plenty of those. It is, instead, a matter of salvation and repentance. Loving neighbor does not come because we talk ourselves into some abstract principle that the *imago dei* resides in every human being. It comes only when we experience God loving us and renewing the divine image in *us*.

In his arresting *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense*, celebrated British novelist Francis Spufford writes not systematic theology but rather a description of how the Christian faith is experienced emotionally by believers. “I am a very this-worldly Christian,” he writes. He says he is fully aware of his past in all of its destruction, fragmentation, and lack of integrity, a past he is unable to repair on his own. “I want a way of living which opens out more widely and honestly and lovingly than I can manage for myself, which widens rather than narrowing with each destructive decision.”¹² This is, of course, a prayer of confession, an appeal for forgiveness and healing. “I don’t care about heaven,” Spufford writes. “I want, I need, the promise of mending.” He continues:

Mended is not the same thing as never broken. We are not being promised that it will be as if the bad stuff never happened. It’s amnesty that’s being offered, not amnesia; hope, not pretense. The story of your life will be the story of your life, permanently. It will still have the kinks and twists and corners you gave it. The consequences of your actions, for you and for other people, will roll inexorably on. God can’t take those away, or your life would not be your life, you would not be you, the world would not be the world. He can only take away from us—take over for us—the guilt and the fear, so that we can start again free, in hope. So that we are freed to try again and fail again, better. He can only overwhelm [our sin] with grace.... Grace is forgiveness we can’t earn. Grace is the weeping father on the road. Grace is tragedy accepted with open arms, and somehow turned to good.¹³

That is, indeed, the breakthrough we need. The love of God is nothing less than God coming to us in the ditches of our lives and lifting us out, mending us and giving us the mercy we need to give it another try. “In this is love,” wrote John, “not that we loved God but that [God] loved us.... We love because [God] first loved us” (1 John 4:10, 19). We can love God—and can be empowered to love the neighbor—only when we experience the breakthrough of God’s healing love for us in our distress.

Breakthrough on Pine and Race Streets

In 1967, in fact in the very week that Cambridge, Maryland was rattled by civil unrest, then President Lyndon Johnson appointed the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to investigate the racial turmoil across the country. About Cambridge, the Commission reported that no “race riot” had occurred at all, just “a low-level civil disturbance.” The tragedy of Cambridge—the fire, the rumors, the fear, the abiding distrust among neighbors, the lingering hatred, the damage to community that still persists two generations later—was basically the result of misperceptions and misunderstandings. “Had it not been for the misperceptions between whites and blacks about each other’s intentions, the commission concluded, the disturbance in Cambridge would have caught hardly anyone’s attention.”¹⁴

In July, 2017, on the fiftieth anniversary of “the flames on Pine Street,” the leaders of a new and bold community organization, the Eastern Shore Network for Change, held “Reflections on Pine: Cambridge Commemorates Civil Rights, Community, and Change.” For four days, many of the residents of Cambridge, black and

white, gathered to remember; to try, no matter the awkwardness and pain, to reclaim the truthful story; and to repent and to forgive. Some of the community leaders from 1967, now in their 80s and 90s, were there to bear witness. The meetings were filled with testimony and passion. “This is *still* a Jim Crow town,” said one aging black resident. “Whenever I meet an African American on the street,” said a white citizen, “I feel as though I am being looked at with the eyes of hate.” Most of all there was the energy and hope of a community seeking healing and a way forward.

It was a first step in a long journey. Cambridge has many miles yet to travel. But there was this one moment, this one breakthrough. The climax of the event was an interracial worship service on Sunday at Bethel A.M.E. Church, one of the key centers of the local civil rights movement in the 1960s. My wife and I, having adopted Cambridge as our home, were in the congregation. The mood was excited and full of anticipation. As the service proceeded, shouts of “Praise God!” and “God is good all the time; all the time, God is good!” punctuated the air. And then we came to the time of prayer. Bethel’s pastor stood at the pulpit and called upon a layman, a member of the congregation, to lead us.

The man rose from his seat as if to come forward, but he didn’t come forward, not immediately anyway. What he did was dance back and forth down the pews and around the sanctuary, only gradually moving toward the altar rail. As he danced, he sang, sang like a Roman priest intoning the Confiteor, that great breast-beating prayer of confession a priest must utter before being worthy to approach the altar, “*Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.*” Only this man’s Confiteor was not “*Mea culpa*” but a spiritual: “It’s me, it’s me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer. It’s me, it’s me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.” He swept his arm across the gathered congregation and continued, “Not my brother or my sister.” Then his hand moved to his heart, “But it’s *me*, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.” Again his hand swept across the congregation only to return to his chest, “Not my mother or my father, but it’s *me*, O Lord. Not the stranger or the neighbor, but it’s *me*, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.”

Now arrived at last at the altar, he turned and knelt, his hands folded humbly atop the rail. He continued to bewail his sins (“You know my heart, Lord. You know the kind of man I’ve been, and you pulled me from the pit.”) and to say how he was only worthy through grace to be in the house of God. Then he turned first to his love for God, lavishing praise and thanksgiving on the God who had saved and sanctified him, and then to the congregation, praying for the sick and infirm, for those who lacked jobs and needed encouragement, and for those at the door of death. He prayed for the larger community and for the whole world in all its brokenness.

And then he paused for a minute as if he were suddenly aware of those of us around him, as if he could hear us breathing, as if he felt the weight of the occasion that had brought us together and the wounds our community still bears. It was at this moment that the breakthrough occurred.

“Lord,” he prayed, starting again, “I’m going to do something I never thought I’d do. You know me, and you know this is something I would never have done before. I pray today, Lord, for the police. Lord, you know, you *know*, there was a time when I couldn’t have done this. But Lord, you know, too, what happened, how those two police officers came to me not long ago, not to harass me, but because they knew I needed them. And they came to help me, Lord, and you came with them.”

This was a man who had no doubt been told over and over again the toxic story, the story of Police Chief Brice Kinnamon grabbing a rifle on that terrible July night and swearing to “get every son of a bitch down there,” the story of the police and fire departments turning a cold eye as the hot fire destroyed property and hope on Pine Street. Now he was performing the previously impossible, praying for the police.

The sanctuary grew silent. None of us could have named it, probably, but this was a breakthrough, a breakthrough in two directions. Somehow, as one of those improbable surprises that can only be the womb out of which God is born among us, some police officers, like despised Samaritans, had evidently come—who knows how or when or why—in compassion to this man in his time of need. And now, as an equally improbable surprise, this man was playing the part of the Good Samaritan himself, doing what he never imagined in his life he’d be doing, bending compassionately over his neighbors in the police, pouring out the oil and wine of mercy and praying for them.

Buber called us to pay attention, to look for such breakthroughs, and to await them in saving hope. It usually doesn’t happen on mountaintops, he warned. It appears “into nothing exalted,” Buber said, “heroic or holy, into no Either and no Or.” Instead it happens, he said, “into this tiny strictness and grace of every day...it can happen.”¹⁰

Into this tiny strictness and grace of every day. Who could say it better? There in the tiny strictness and everyday grace of the Jericho Road, there in a church on Pine Street, we feel it, the love of God breaking through to mend us, to claim us, to give us our lives back, and to place us back on the road to encounter our neighbors with the love we ourselves have been given by grace.

Notes

1 Peter B. Levy, *Civil War on Race Street: The Civil Rights Movement in Cambridge, Maryland* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2003), 4-5.

2 Dustin Holt, “Studying the Flames of 1967,” *Dorchester Star*, July 28, 2017, 3.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Levy, *Civil War on Race Street*, 141-142.

5 Holt, “Studying the Flames of 1967,” 3.

6 See T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 260.

7 David Garland, *Luke: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 439.

8 Martin Buber, *Between Man and God* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 41.

9 See, for example, a discussion of this question in O. Dan Via, “Parable and Example Story: A Literary Structuralist Approach,” *Semeia* 1 (1974), 105-133.

10 Buber, *Between Man and God*, 41-42.

11 Augustine, “Exposition on Psalm 126.”

12 Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), 163.

13 *Ibid.*, 164.

14 Levy, *Civil War on Race Street*, 149.

15 Buber, *Between Man and God*, 41-42.