

There’s been a disturbing theme in the news this fall. First, a toddler in China is run over by two different vehicles and left bleeding in the street while 18 people walk on by. Then, in Maryland, a sales clerk at an upscale yoga shop is brutally murdered; and while workers in the store next door reported hearing screams and thumps, no one went over see if everything was okay. And now we have the horrifying reports of what happened in the locker room at Penn State, and the outrage that not one person who knew about it followed up to make sure the abuse was stopped. Three chilling crimes. Three situations when no one stepped forward to help. Why?

Psychologists have a name for this. It’s called *the bystander effect*. The greater the number of people present, the less likely people are to help a person in distress. In other words, the more we see others doing nothing, the more we believe that “nothing” is an okay thing to do. Now, maybe sometimes we don’t act because it’s not our problem. Or because we can think of a million reasons not to get involved. Or because we don’t want to interfere. Or maybe it’s because it’s harder to do the right thing than to do the same thing as everyone else.

You can see the bystander effect here in our own community. What about car after car that passes by the man with the sign on the 2nd Street ramp off 52? Or the abused woman whose coworkers never ask about her bruises? Or the single person with no family nearby who endures the holidays alone because no one thinks to invite them to dinner?

British statesman Edmund Burke put it this way: “Evil flourishes when good men do nothing.” That’s a strong word, evil, but the bottom line is, it doesn’t matter if we don’t act wrongly, if we don’t act, it’s still wrong.

Isn't that what Jesus is getting at in his parable? The "goats" are the people who couldn't be bothered to take care of those in need? *Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked or in prison?* Their protests sound eerily similar to those of too many bystanders. *I didn't know I needed to do something. I figured someone else was going to take care of it.* But clearly that's not acceptable to the king: *When you did not take care of the least of these, Jesus said, you did not take care of me.*

No, the ones who are blessed are those who have looked with Christ's eyes and cared with Christ's heart. In that way, this story brings to mind the story of the Good Samaritan. A man was beaten by robbers and left for dead by the side of the road. Once, twice he is passed by without so much as a second glance. But the third man who comes along sees his wounds, and his heart tells him to do something. Everyone knows who the hero of the story is: the one who showed mercy.

But Matthew's story ups the ante. Whereas the story of the Good Samaritan simply exhorts us to *go and do likewise*, in Matthew it's clear that those who do not *do likewise* will have to answer for their inaction. This is a story about God's judgment. It's a warning to wake up and do something. There aren't supposed to be any bystanders in God's kingdom. If there is a wrong to be righted, it's our job to right it. If there's a heart that's hurting, it's our job to care.

Let's be honest, when no one else is doing something, speaking up and speaking out is hard. Getting involved is messy. It doesn't always fix the problem. And even when we try to help, we don't always know what to do. We don't necessarily feel good afterwards. Sometimes getting involved means getting your hands dirty or your anger raised or your heart bruised. But there's an old saying: *if not you, than who? If not now, then when?* And don't we claim that it's God's work, our hands? Don't we trust in a God

who promises that when we reach out in his name, he will give us courage, conviction, compassion: God will be with us.

The reality is, you probably pass by someone who's hungry or homeless or sick or lonely 100 times a day. You can't say yes to everyone. You can't save the whole world. But can you make enough room in your life and enough time in your day to reach out somehow? *If not you, then who? If not now, then when?*

My friend Mary Kay struggled with this question last week. Early Wednesday morning, when she got to work, she noticed a beat-up car parked in the far corner of the lot. The engine was running. The windows were fogged over. She could see the shadowy forms of people inside. She thought, *whatever is going on in there isn't my business*. The next time she looked out the window, the car was gone. Still, she couldn't shake the questions from her head. *Who were those people? Did they need help? Should I have called the police?*

The next morning, the car was there again. Engine running. Windows fogged over. But this time, instead of looking the other way, Mary Kay walked over to the car. The back seat was a jumbled mess of clothes and garbage. A young man and woman in plaid shirts and dirty jeans were sleeping on the front seats. She took a deep breath and knocked lightly on the passenger window. *Are you ok?* she asked. *Do you need help?* The woman inside shook her head. No. *What about some food, do you need something to eat?* The woman's eyes were filled with fear, and shame. They flicked to the man still sleeping behind the wheel. And then she shook her head again. No. My friend left with a pit in her stomach and a pain in her heart.

On Friday morning, when Mary Kay got to work, the parking lot was empty. The folks in the car found a different place to spend the night. Mary Kay never learned the

answers to her questions. All she knows is, at least she didn't just look the other way. She didn't stand by and wait for someone else to do something. She looked with Christ's eyes, and cared with Christ's heart.

Friends, it's harder to do the right thing than to do what everyone else is doing. But how you choose to respond to the needs you see matters. Somebody's life depends on it. There are still strangers out there looking for a place to belong. There are still hungry bellies to be filled, still shivering children sleeping on the streets. *If not you, then who?* What happens if you just stand by?

This morning is Christ the King Sunday. As we close the church year, we think not of our world today, but the world to come, when Jesus will reign and the mess we've made of our world will be made right. As Christians, we believe that someday we will stand before Christ our king. We'll have to give an account for our lives. Parables like this one make that sound like that's something to fear. But we already know that Jesus is a king of forgiveness and love and grace. He's a king on a cross. *When did we see this king hungry or thirsty or naked or a stranger?* How about *in the eyes of everyone we meet*. If that's the case, then doesn't it matter more what we will do to serve our king now?

You will no doubt encounter someone today who is lost or sick or hurting or lonely. The king is watching to see what you will do. Will you be the one to say, *I will not be the person who passes by*. Maybe with his help, you will stop and reach out in love. If not you, then who? If not now, then when? Amen.