

*Based on Luke 3:7-14. John the Baptist Tells Us What to Do*

*“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”*

Since July of 2002, prompted by the mounting deaths of migrants crossing our southern border, people of conscience and faith in Tucson, Arizona – including Presbyterians – have banded together to render humanitarian aid to migrants in distress in the desert. They call themselves the Tucson Samaritans.

On a daily basis, the Samaritans provide water to desert-crossing migrants who are dehydrated from walking in the desert heat. They treat severe sprains or other physical injuries incurred in this dangerous terrain. They bandage blistered feet (which is potentially life-threatening if you cannot walk and get left behind). They give diapers and baby formula for infants traveling with migrants. They offer food to those who are hungry, they provide blankets on cold desert nights, and they call emergency aid for those who are close to heat stroke.

All of this in keeping with the ancient tradition of desert hospitality to travelers. Which is, in fact, biblical: a moral institution insisting that, when we occupy desert land, and a stranger appears, before anything else – even before asking their name – we offer them welcome in the form of shelter and then tend to their physical needs.

Desert Hospitality is – emphatically – *not* an act of charity. It is an act of justice, in the sense that desert hospitality ensures right relationships among every group of people. It is reciprocal. If every group of people *offers* hospitality, that means every group can also *expect* it. Desert Hospitality ensures all people are “*just us.*”

In the spirit of desert hospitality, legend has it the Tucson Samaritans ventured forth into the desert on one of their daily sojourns, calling out *tenemos comida*, as they glimpsed a group of migrants along the trail ahead. *We have food. Tenemos agua*, they said, as they closed the distance. *We have water.*

The group of migrants stopped dead in their tracks, holding up their hands, as if to keep the Samaritans at bay. The Samaritans stayed put, mindful of the fact the migrants might suspect they were connected with Border enforcement, and they waited. Moments later, one of the migrants made his way to the Samaritans. Speaking in Spanish, the migrant said, *I am very sorry. We do not have much food, and we have even less water, but when we heard you calling out, we took a vote and decided: if you really need it, we will gladly share what we have.*

*Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none*, the Baptizer says to the crowds flooding the Jordan, fleeing some sort of unexplained “wrath” that is “to come.” *Whoever has food must do likewise.*

It is a fairly simple admonition, we might think at first. Not exactly a radical new social program, or an intellectually nuanced theological insight. Unless we put this teaching in the context of the Tucson Samaritans and the migrants who offer desert hospitality to *them*.

The crowds who flood the Jordan in this Lesson fit the category of “comfortable.” Likely well-educated. Likely employed. Likely able to rely on their wits and their grit to get by on most things. Likely not living on the precipice in a dangerous desert every day. But generally good-hearted. Generally well-meaning. Generally trying to do the right thing to the best of their ability. Generally like the Samaritans. Good people trying to do good things.

But all of a sudden their world is falling apart. While we do not have historic evidence of a pandemic in first century Judea, we do have evidence of a political crisis of epic proportions. We do have evidence of a raging debate among factions of their faith on how best to live in the face of it all.

I would want to flee that wrath, too! I want to right now!

John, himself, has fled that world. He grew up among this same crowd that now floods the Jordan, as the son of well-regarded priestly lineage on both his mother's side and his father's. But John has turned his back on that upbringing. He has made a clean break from the comfortability he could have taken for granted. John has chosen the desert wilderness, with its camel hair and locusts and wild honey, and its moral imperative of reciprocal hospitality.

*A brood of vipers* John calls his former colleagues when they come out to be baptized by him. *God could cut you down right now if God wanted to!* Talk about hellfire and brimstone! To be fair, these could be the words of a prophetic preacher speaking the hard truth to people who are used to being coddled. Or it could just be John's projection of his own self-loathing onto those from whom he descends. Truly, as we said in our Teach the Preacher gathering this week, most people do a pretty good job of beating up on themselves; they generally don't need someone else to do it for them.

Either way, John's most helpful point is this: don't rest on your laurels, applauding yourselves for everything you think you've done so well already. Doing so simply will not save you now. And don't come rushing to me for a ritualistic Jordan River miracle. That will not save you, either.

Just share what you have. And live as ethically as you can. It is not that hard. Which is actually a big step up if you consider John could have told them the only way to "flee the wrath" was to join him in camel hair and commune only with locusts!

Share what you have, John says instead. Live as ethically as you can under the circumstances.

It really is fairly easy. Except it does not stop there. I think John knows that when we put ourselves in a place to offer true *reciprocal* hospitality, our eyes open, and our hearts expand, and our minds end up wanting to commit to an entirely new way of life. The Tucson Samaritans' encounter with desert crossing migrants teaches us that.

Once we have experienced *true* hospitality, *reciprocal* hospitality, we come to understand in body and soul the meaning of our baptism into solidarity with all who suffer. Once we have experience true hospitality, reciprocal hospitality, we comprehend more deeply the character of our communion. Once we have experienced *true* hospitality, *reciprocal* hospitality, we find ourselves walking a way of life that just might save us all.

And those vipers John claims we have brooded to become? Our Teach the Preacher gathering reminds us the snake is in fact a miraculous creature. The snake can only grow by *shedding its skin*. By divesting itself of its former public image and inviting a more vulnerable engagement with all of its surroundings.

Maybe it is not such a terrible thing to be a brood of vipers after all.

Perhaps this is John's deeper invitation behind calling us to share what we have and live as ethically as we can. If we *really* want to grow spiritually, ethically, morally, in right relationship with God and with one another, we really do have to shed our well-crafted image – the one we cultivate so carefully on social media and beyond – and simply be in the wilderness together.

Which is what ends up happening on that legendary day when the Tucson Samaritans receive the hospitality of those desert-crossing migrants. They walk together for a while. They do end up sharing their food and water with one another. And they realize they share a common faith: The Way of Jesus. The Way we say at SPC we want to walk, as well.

One of the migrants is motivated by faith to head to Indiana to reunite with relatives. One is fleeing violence and will land wherever she finds work. One is nursing a daughter, for whom she hopes to provide a better life. One is simply grateful he has made it through alive.

The Samaritans share their stories, too. And even more their commitment. To educate other people of faith and conscience – including us – throughout this nation that has become so incredibly *inhospitable*. To advocate for just and comprehensive immigration reform at the federal and local levels, which is part of the national Presbyterian Church Witness in Washington. And to inspire us all to live more faithfully together in this worldwide wilderness we call life, which is what you will hear more about from our Immigrant and Refugee Task Force immediately following worship today.

Every one of those desert crossing migrants that day, in their own way, follows the same Way of Jesus we say we want to follow. And even if they did not, every one of those desert crossing migrants is, in some mystical way, present at this table with us today. A table that is, as I regularly remind us, not *our* table. Or the Presbyterian Church's table. Or even, I go so far to say, the "Christian" table, in the sense that Christianity has become a religious institution that keeps some in and others out, like we in this country do at our southern border.

This is the table of Jesus. Who comes to be baptized by the one who says *whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise*. This is the table of Jesus. Who picks up the mantle of John the Baptizer, and says to us all: *Tenemos comida*. We have food. *Tenemos agua*. We have drink.

This is the table of Jesus. Who says: *It may not look like much – just a crumble of bread and maybe, if we're lucky an ounce of juice – but if you really need it, we will gladly share*.

Let the church say, Amen!