

## “What Does Darfur Have to do With Me?”

Luke 10:25-37

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John Donne is a 17<sup>th</sup> Century poet I started reading in college. The more I read, the more I wanted to read. My parents believed in a liberal arts education so they steered us toward colleges that offered what they might have described as an education for life or an education for citizenship. I am grateful for that attitude and I am grateful for John Donne’s contribution to my education. He taught me well. He is the one who wrote:

No man is an island entire to itself; every man  
Is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;  
If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is  
Less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as  
Any manner of thy friends or of thine own were;  
any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved  
in mankind.  
And therefore never send to ask for whom the bell tolls;  
It tolls for thee.

It is hard to read this poem without being changed. It is hard to read this poem without feeling instantly connected to every man, every woman, and every child who walks on the face of the earth. It speaks directly to the question, what does Darfur have to do with me?

“Ask not for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

As I began to craft this sermon, I held John Donne’s poem in one hand, and I held the Good Samaritan story in the other hand. The Good Samaritan story is the one that pushes hard on the question, “Who is my neighbor?”

Clearly, Jesus told this beloved parable because his disciples had a painfully limited definition of neighbor. Clearly, Jesus felt compelled to broaden their thinking. Peter, James, John and the others had all been thinking to themselves, ‘what does Samaria have to do with me?’

Many have read the Good Samaritan parable and assumed it is about doing a good deed, turning aside from the mission you’re on in order to lend a helping hand to another. But the gist of this parable is about breaking out of one’s parochial thinking, embracing a definition of neighbor that is inclusive rather than exclusive, a definition of neighbor that includes Darfur and Liberia and Rwanda, that includes Bosnia and Serbia and Mesopotamia, that includes East Timor, and Haiti, and the Dominican Republic.

In the kingdom of God, there is no such question, ‘what does Darfur have to do with me?’ There is no such question because in the vision of God for humanity we are all neighbors: there are no longer Jews and Samaritans; no longer Africans and North Americans; no longer Arabs and non-Arabs; in the kingdom of God we all are neighbors. This is the very heart of the Gospel; it’s what Jesus came to proclaim. Darfur has something to do with me because Darfurians are my neighbors.

In the western region of Sudan, tribes are locked in a deadly conflict. Some say it has to do with grazing rights for camels and goats. Some say it has to do with oil exploration rights. Some say it has to do with ancient tribal differences. As our Mission and Social Action boards have wrestled with how to respond to all the suffering in that part of Africa, they have focused not so much on the **why** and the **who is to blame**. They have focused, instead, on the 2.5 million human beings who have been displaced from their homes and are living, barely living, in refugee camps.

To a great extent, the world has been like those two religious leaders in Jesus' parable who see the traveler beaten and robbed and left in the road ditch to die, and keep on walking toward their appointed destination. Lauren deMercado and Katy Foster and Rachel Resnisky and many others at South Church are choosing to be the Good Samaritan, the ones whose definition of neighborhood is not constrained by geographical boundaries or racial identity or economic standing. They are not asking for whom the bell tolls. They are not asking to see the passports. They ARE saying, 'people are hurting, how can we relieve the hurting?'

It is an all too common story in the refugee camps. The cooking is done over charcoal fires. It is the women who are sent outside the security of the camps to gather the wood. And it is the women, seeking firewood, who are raped by marauding militia men. One hope of the Social Action and Mission boards is to host a Sudanese supper in the social hall on October 5<sup>th</sup>, and to raise enough money there to purchase several solar cookers so the refugee women can cook food for their children without being violated in the search for firewood. It seems like a simple thing, a solar cooker. But it's a life-affirming thing. It seems like a tiny thing. But it's a life-saving thing. It seems like a thing of little consequence. But it's a thing of grand consequence to every woman living in those desert camps.

When Moses encounters God in the burning bush, he hears God sending him on a mission. God says to Moses, 'tell my people I have heard their cry. I know their suffering.' But in order for the liberation to take place, God needs Moses to get on board with the mission, to become a co-worker in the freedom effort. That's the way God has worked throughout history, by enlisting ordinary people to be partners in extraordinary mission endeavors.

Did you know that Moses is alive and well and living at South Church? Moses is Lauren and Katy. Moses is Rachel and Derek. Moses is everyone present who hears God saying, 'tell my people in Darfur I have heard their cry. I know their suffering.' Moses is everyone present who chooses to be God's co-workers, who roll up their sleeves and see what can be done to alleviate the suffering, to bring an end to the violations, to be a neighbor to the ones who are still being beaten and robbed and left in the ditches to die.

What does Darfur have to do with me? This is a question that keeps me up at night. In a sense, it is Cain's question to God, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

One thing I know is that my best teachers have been the ones who have suffered the most. William T. Collins, my high school roommate born deaf, taught me what it means to respect another human being. Pete Paterson with his Parkinson's taught me what it means to have courage. Kristen Nolan with her cancer taught me about perseverance. Dietrich Bonhoeffer with his imprisonment in Nazi Germany taught me about faith. Rosa Parks with her arrest on a Birmingham bus taught me about justice. In losing their first-born child to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, Russ and Becky Peacock taught me the sacredness of grief. What I know is that I am more fully human because men and women and children who suffer have been my teachers. I am not grateful for suffering. I hate suffering. I AM grateful to those whose suffering has revealed something of God to them and who have chosen to share that revelation of God by telling their stories. Somehow, as the stories of Darfur are told we will all be more fully alive, more fully human, more fully committed to tolerating violence no longer.

What does Darfur have to do with you? I hope this question keeps you up at night. I hope we can talk about it. It's the kind of question Jesus talked about with his disciples. It's the kind of question churches and other faith communities need to talk about.

John Donne speaks prophetically,

“Never send to ask for whom the bell tolls.  
It tolls for thee.”

In the greatest of hope, Amen!