

“*Yesterday* and the Simple Religion of Jesus”
 Proper 11C (July 21, 2019)
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen.<<

The Danny Boyle film *Yesterday* is out right now in theatres.¹ I saw it the other evening. *Yesterday* stars British actor Himesh Patel, who plays a struggling songwriter named Jack Malik in the film. Jack’s music and lyrics don’t connect with the yawning, disinterested, and tiny crowds he plays for in backwater pubs and at birthday parties. And so one day Jack decides he’s had enough, and gives up his songwriting passion to move on with his life. That evening, after making his decision, Jack was riding his bicycle home when all the power in the world suddenly went out; lights in every city across the world went dark for a few minutes. In the darkness Jack was accidentally hit by a bus and knocked unconscious. When he awoke in a hospital bed, the world *seemed* normal, and he began to recover from his injuries. Once out of the hospital, Jack’s friends presented him with a new guitar to encourage him to return to his passion, and they asked him to play something for them. So, Jack played The Beatles song *Yesterday*. His friends were dumbstruck. “When did you write that?” they asked. This is when Jack began to realize that he was the only one in the whole world who remembered The Beatles after the power outage. He rushed home and Googled “The Beatles,” and the only thing that came up in his search was the bug. The band had disappeared. Seizing the opportunity, Jack went on a binge of remembering Beatles songs, feverishly writing out their lyrics, and soon had compiled a long list of songs that he then passed off as his own music. Many of The Beatles greats were on his list: *Help!*, *Let it Be*, *I Want to Hold Your Hand*, *Something*, *Hey Jude*, *I Saw Her Standing There*, *Here Comes the Sun* (which Jack pretends to have written on his way to Los Angeles), *Back in the USSR* (which he performs in Moscow), the list of blockbuster hits goes on and on.

In one scene, songwriter Ed Sheeran, who plays himself in the film, challenged Jack to a songwriting dual: each songwriter had just a few minutes to write an original song and perform it for a small crowd who would vote on which song was better. Sheeran performed his original song first and did well with the crowd. When it was Jack’s turn, he sat at a piano and played The Beatles song *The Long and Winding Road*, which everyone in the crowd thought he’d miraculously written in a matter of minutes. “You’re Mozart, mate,” said Sheeran in awe after admitting defeat. The world believed Jack was a genius songwriter - a new Mozart. But as his star rose, as a lucrative record deal was prepared, Jack churned inside, knowing that he was really a fraud, and haunted by a feeling of dread that at some point Paul McCartney would come out of the woodwork and reveal the truth. Viewers of the film *Yesterday* sit uncomfortably in the theatre wondering the same thing.

The turning point happened when Jack met an elderly John Lennon - a Lennon who apparently had never made music before, but who lived happily in a cottage by the sea. Meeting Lennon convinced Jack to tell the world the truth, which he did in a sold out stadium concert. After giving up the life of fame, in the film’s final scene, Jack is sitting in a classroom having a blast teaching school children *Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da* from the White

¹ An overview of its plot and characters can be read here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yesterday_\(2019_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yesterday_(2019_film))

album, and then he goes on to live happily ever after with the love of his life, played by actor Lily James.

Living in an alternate reality is portrayed so uncomfortably well in the film that you almost want to hide your eyes as you cringe during some of the scenes. But as fiction does so well - whether in novels or in films - *Yesterday* speaks to a human condition that some of us feel today, especially after this past week's events in the news - the stories and the commentaries on the rallies and the Tweets, the Eric Garner case, the speeches on the floor of the House of Representatives, the oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz, the 50th anniversary of the moon-landing which brought to the fore the reality of climate change, and the video story in Thursday's *New York Times* of children reading the testimonies of migrant children held in camps at the border, and on it goes. If you've been following the news, my guess is that some, or even many, or even most, or perhaps all of you sitting here today felt this week like people in our country live in parallel universes. As a preacher I'm committed to dealing in the pulpit on Sundays with current events. But, I have to admit, each week there is so much going on that sometimes it feels like, "where do you even begin?" And so, today, I want to go back to the basics - back to the basics as outlined by that old Hebrew prophet Amos, and back to that simple religion of Jesus articulated so beautifully in a story he told.

Today's scripture readings have been culled from different weeks on the Lectionary - that three year cycle of Bible readings that most mainline and Catholic churches in the world follow each week. Today's reading from Amos is *actually* today's OT reading on the Lectionary. Today's gospel reading, however, the Parable of the Good Samaritan, was *last* week's Lectionary gospel reading. But since this parable is one of my favorite stories in the Bible, and since I was on vacation last week, and since we won't see it again on the Lectionary for a while, and since it outlines the simple religion of Jesus so clearly, I didn't want to pass up a chance to preach on it. But let me start with the prophet Amos. Amos is one of the Bible's most fiery characters - most of the book that goes by his name is a relentless screed. Amos speaks about God using weather and plagues and foreign armies to deliver terrestrial judgment; and it's not until the book's final chapter, which most scholars think was added by later editors, that we finally hear any news of hope and promise. Amos is mostly a tough read. But it's an instructional read, since Amos focuses on the simple basics of biblical religion. It's a back to the basics book, which, if you peel back the layers of judgment and terror, tries to communicate a basic message - a message that is at the heart of Jewish law in the Old Testament, and is at the heart of the message of Jesus, and is at the heart of St. Paul's many letters. The commandment that is the summary of all the Bible's commands, as St. Paul once put it: Love your neighbor as yourself. Amos indicts those who fall short of living out this command.

According to his own testimony, Amos was a humble farmer when God called him to preach. He was, as so many others are in the Bible - from Moses to Deborah to Jeremiah to Jonah to John the Baptist to Mary the mother of Jesus to St. Paul himself - Amos was like all of them an unlikely messenger of God. He was just a humble farmer from the countryside. In Amos' day, the nation of Israel was split into two kingdoms, one in the north and the other in the south; like two different countries. Amos was a southerner, called by God to leave his fields and his livestock and go preach in the north. In one place in this nine chapter book, Amos writes that he was a humble "herdsman" and a "dresser of sycamore trees" before God took him from "following the flock" and sent him to prophesy. "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's

son,” wrote Amos, “I’m just a farmer and a shepherd.” I remember the day our seminary president preached on Amos during one of our chapel gatherings at Gordon-Conwell Seminary. Dr. Kaiser joked about Amos’ admission, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son.” “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son,” said Dr. Kaiser in his sermon, “but,” he went on with a smirk, “I do work for a nonprofit institution.”

Amos was an eighth century BCE farmer, called by God to leave his home in the southern kingdom, march north, and enter an alternate reality in the north - an alternate reality, like Jack Malik experienced in the film *Yesterday*. And in that alternate reality in the north, Amos found luxury and injustice shrouded in a veneer of patriotism and religiosity that he found repulsive. Like a prosecuting attorney pressing a case, Amos indicted the northerners for failing to love their neighbors - failing to fulfill that most basic of biblical principles. He left his plow and preached to those in the halls of power, to those in the king’s court, and even to the king in the north himself - calling them all back to the basics: love your neighbor as yourself. Amos criticized all forms of religiosity - festivals and assemblies and ceremonies and worship services - he criticized them all as worthless if the worshippers weren’t striving to, as Amos said, “let justice roll down like water” What good is your religion, he argued, if it focuses on pomp and circumstance but ignores a fellow human being without a home? In response to his prophetic words, Amos was told - in words that sound familiar to us after this week’s news - Amos was told by the high priest in the north to “go back to his own country to fix the problems there.” The reading we heard a moment ago from Amos ch. 8 summarizes this ancient prophet’s message: a warning to those who, as Amos says, “trample on the needy,” and who profit from keeping people in poverty, and who shroud injustice in the cloak of piety. The message of Amos is so basic. Pure religion is built on a simple and straightforward message: love your neighbor as yourself.

This also is the central message of the parable of the Good Samaritan - a story that famed preacher William Sloane Coffin once called “well worn, but wears well.”² It’s a story that makes the simple point, said Coffin, “that if you want to find God you need seek no further than your neighbor’s need.” It’s a simple story that outlines in simple, straightforward prose, the simple religion of Jesus. And Jesus outlines his simple religion by way of *story*. He could’ve preached a sermon, as he did in the Sermon on the Mount when he spoke the beatitudes, or in a synagogue in Nazareth when he said the Spirit of God is upon me to preach good news to the poor. He could’ve preached a sermon to the bystanders on that day he was asked by an expert in Jewish law, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus could’ve responded to this question that begins today’s reading from Luke with a sermon - perhaps a homily on the meaning of eternal life and how to gain it. But he doesn’t preach. Instead, he tells a story about a traveler who was attacked, robbed, beaten, and left for dead on a lonely roadside; a traveler who was ignored by a priest and a Levite - the clergy of the day - but helped by a Samaritan. Jesus deliberately inserts this Samaritan character into his story, because a Samaritan was the least likely of the three men to offer help: Samaritans were members of a different racial group in the first century; they were members of a different religious group in the first century; they were the Palestinians helping the wounded Israelis; the Iranians helping wounded Americans; the African-American teenager in a hoodie sweatshirt helping the wounded white man in a suit; the migrants from Guatemala helping wounded ICE agents on a roadside. The point Jesus is making is that morality is not tied to

² Randy Wilson Coffin, ed., *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin: The Riverside Years, vol. 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 239.

race or religion or creed or nationality; if someone - a neighbor, anyone, of a different race or creed or religion or nationality - if a neighbor is in need, says Jesus, their humanity is all that matters.

It's a simple story, a simple message, a simple religion, that pulls people out of parallel or alternate, *Yesterday*, realities and mixes them together in the common pot of what Martin Luther King Jr. once called the "brotherhood of man."

It's a simple story and message and religion that was updated recently by Christian Picciolini in his powerful TED Talk.³ Picciolini is a modern day Good Samaritan, and in his talk, he admits to having once been a white supremacist, but after renouncing that ideology, he's spent his life trying to liberate others. One person who was liberated by Picciolini was a man named Darrell. Here's how Picciolini tells that story: "After a couple of weeks of going back and forth with Darrell [over email], I learned he was a 31-year-old military veteran who had been injured and was really angry about not being able to go to Afghanistan to kill Muslims. And one day on the phone, he told me that he had seen a Muslim man in the park praying, and that all he wanted to do was [attack him]. I flew to Buffalo the next day," says Picciolini, "and I sat down with Darrell, and I asked him, 'Have you ever met a Muslim person before?' And he said, 'No! Why ... would I want to do that? They're evil. I don't want anything to do with them.' I said, 'OK.' So I excused myself, and I went into the bathroom and I took my phone out ... , and I Googled the local mosque, and I called them very quietly from the bathroom, and I said, 'Excuse me, imam, I need a favor. I have a Christian man who would really love to learn more about your religion. Do you mind if we stop by?' Well, it took some convincing for Darrell to go, but finally we got there [and met the imam.] ... We went in, and two and a half hours later, we came out after hugging and crying and, very strangely, bonding over Chuck Norris for some reason. I don't know what it was about that, but that's what happened. And I'm happy to say now that Darrell and the imam, you can often find them at the local falafel stand, having lunch together. You see," concludes Picciolini, "it's our disconnection from each other. Hatred is born of ignorance. Fear is its father, and isolation is its mother. When we don't understand something, we tend to be afraid of it, and if we keep ourselves from it, that fear grows, and sometimes, it turns into hatred. Since I've left the [white supremacist] movement," he goes on, "I've helped over a hundred people disengage from extremist movements, from white supremacist groups ... And the way I do that is not by arguing with them, not by debating them, not by even telling them they're wrong, even though, boy, I want to sometimes. I don't do that. Instead, ... I draw them in closer, and I listen very closely [to their stories]"

Picciolini ends with these words: "So I would like to leave you with a challenge: go out there today, tomorrow - hopefully every day - find somebody that you think is undeserving of your compassion and give it to them, because I guarantee you, they're the ones who need it the most." Amen.

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https://www.ted.com/talks/christian_picciolini_my_descent_into_america_s_neo_nazi_movement_and_how_i_got_out/transcript