**Stepping Into Their Shoes**

**Luke 10:25-37**

**[Title SLIDE]** A 13-year-old Steve stayed after the worship service to ask his pastor this pressing question: “Pastor, if I raise my finger, will God know which one I’m going to raise even before I raise it?” His pastor replied, “Yes, God knows everything.”

Steve then pulled out a *Life* magazine cover **[Magazine pic SLIDE]** that had haunted him for some time depicting two African children with distended stomachs caused by starvation. He then asked a follow-up question, “Well, does God know about this and what’s going to happen to those kids?” The pastor gave a similar condescending response,” Steve, I know you don’t understand, but yes, God knows about that.”

Steve wasn’t satisfied with the pastor’s answer and walked out of that sanctuary that day and never again worshiped at a Christian church. You see, beyond the difficult theological question was a young person who was trying to make sense of who God was in his own life as he faced bullying at school, financial struggles at home, and most painfully, being relinquished for adoption by his birth parents. As Steve was trying to make sense of the pain in our world, he wanted his pastor to understand and help him make sense of his pain in his own world.

You all might have heard of Steve. **[Steve Jobs SLIDE]** His last name was Jobs. The late Steve Jobs, founder and former CEO of Apple, was a churchgoing teenager who wrestled with big questions. He wanted to be understood and to understand the mysteries of faith. I’m not sure that the pastor’s shallow answer to his deep question was what drove him away from church. What if it was the lack of connection to caring Christian adults who would walk alongside of him to help him make sense of this crazy world? What if it was the lack of adults in his life that he could trust to share his joys and his pains? Imagine how things might have turned out if there were men and women in the church who took an interest in Steve?

In today’s text, we find the familiar story of the Good Samaritan. **[Good Samaritan SLIDE]** Often this parable is simply taught as a general moral lesson: if you see someone in the ditch, the Christ-like thing to do is go and help them. We’ve all heard of the fact that Samaritans were despised by the Jews, which is expanded into a further moral lesson about the wickedness of racial and religious prejudice. However, we must remember the context in which Jesus tells this well-known parable. The teacher of the law stood up to trap Jesus in front of others and wanted to know what one had to do to earn eternal life. Jesus, being Jesus, answers the question with a question. “What does the law say?” The lawyer of course gives the answer that was expected, the Shema: to love God with all of your heart, mind, soul and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. The lawyer then follows with a logical rebuttal, “Who is my neighbor?”

The lawyer’s question and Jesus’ answer don’t quite match up at first, but don’t think for a minute that Jesus misunderstood the question. You see, for the lawyer, God is the God of Israel. Therefore, his neighbors are only those who are Jews. But for Jesus, Israel’s God is the God of grace for the whole world and a neighbor is anyone in need. But going even a little deeper, I think what Jesus was communicating was that helping others isn’t just for the good of those that need help but it is for the good of the good Samaritan. We are the beneficiaries for helping others who are in need.

Now, to connect the dots for us, what if we saw our young people as the man beaten half dead on the side of the road? **[Reality of YA SLIDE]** Of course, you might feel like this is a stretch to consider our young people as the one in the proverbial ditch. If you would give me some latitude, let me see if I can lay out my case.

I often ask adults to share what labels we hear about young people. We started with words that I often hear…lazy, privileged, entitled, stuck to their phones. Thankfully, we also hear words like gifted, talented, justice-motivated and courageous. Our young people are more than the labels our society puts on them. The reality is that it is simply taking a little longer for our younger generations to reach adulthood.

Everyone desires stability and predictability. **[Linear graph SLIDE]** Looking from a 10,000 ft. perspective, when many of us grew up, life was fairly predictable and linear. For most of us, we knew that we would go to finish high school, go to college, graduate, find a job, get married and have kids. That was the order in which life was supposed to happen and it was fairly predictable. Today, that just isn’t the reality our young adults face. **[Multiple options SLIDE]** So when life looks like this,it causes uncertainty and anxiety.

Due to the shifts in our culture such as the amount of education needed to compete in the marketplace along with the change in family structure, most sociologists believe young people do not reach adulthood until they are 28-30 years old.

Here are a couple of examples of how society has shifted. The median age for first marriage is now 28 for women and almost 30 for men, both of which are more than five years later than 1970. The median age for women bearing their first child is now 30 years of age, which is more than five years later than women 50 years ago. In the past, we thought that our young adults would return back to church when they got married and had kids. Well, that is not happening nearly at the same rate today.

It is also a given that young people in middle class and upper class would pursue a college degree, not to mention the need for a master’s or a doctorate to compete in the marketplace. Among college graduates, approximately one-third continue on to graduate school the following year. While previous generations of young adults plunged into the workforce right after high school or in their early twenties, many young adults do not have that opportunity until they are in their late twenties or early thirties to pursue their career. This is the reason why over 40 percent of young adults boomerang back home with their parents at least once in their twenties.

NOW, our young people are dealing with the impacts of the pandemic. Over the last 3 years, mental health challenges have skyrocketed. According to CDC, anxiety in teenagers have tripled (from 8.1% to 25.5%) and depression almost quadrupled (from 6.5% to 24.3%). And approximately half of young adults ages 18-24 during the pandemic were wrestling with anxiety or depression.

There are many more reasons we don’t have time to mention in worship but it all points to the fact that the world many of us grew up in is no longer the world our young people experience.

All of us grew up searching for the answers to three universal questions: Who am I? Where do I fit? How will my life matter? **[IBP SLIDE]** Matter of fact, we are constantly answering these three questions at every life-stage we go through. New parents seek answers to the three questions of identity, belonging and purpose. When you transition into a new job in a new community, you ask the same questions. When you become empty-nesters, you have to discover again who you are, where you fit and what purpose you have. When your spouse passes away, you ask yourself the same questions.

For our young people, they feel the pressure to answer these three questions of identity, belonging and purpose with greater intensity. On top of that, they seek out these answers with less relational support of adults in their lives than I experienced while growing up. As our young people have turned to each other and to the world to seek answers to their identity, belonging and purpose, they often find the wrong answers in the wrong places. **[IBP Current Narrative SLIDE]** They often discover answers filled with shame, conditional acceptance and self-fulfillment. Yet, the Good News of Jesus tells us of a different story. **[IBP Jesus Centered SLIDE]** Jesus reminds us of grace, love and God-given mission.

So, you see, we might consider our young people as the beaten Jewish man left for dead. How might we respond? Will we stand on the other side of the road and say “I told you so!”? Will we simply walk by because we don’t know how or have the time to help? Will we stand in arrogance to declare that if they would simply come to church, they would know better? Will we say to ourselves, “Why are we putting so much focus on the young people? What about me? What about my needs?” OR Will we seek ways to share the grace, love and mission Christ offers to all of us with the young people in the church and in our community?

If you desire to be like the Samaritan from the parable, here are a couple of things to keep in mind. First, we have to work on developing empathy for our young people. Empathy is not patronizing young people. Nor is it superficial or false sympathy. It certainly is not judgmentalism, even if it’s cloaked in helpful suggestions. (“Instead of playing video games all day, have you thought about looking online for a job?”) **[Empathy SLIDE]** Empathy is a sense of “feeling with” or the idea of stepping into their shoes.

**[5:1 SLIDE]** Second, we should consider how we can apply the 5:1 principle. Studies have shown that young people who have at least five caring Christian adults outside of their parents tend to hold on to their faith more than those who do not have the relational support. Yet, most of us shy away from even having a conversation with them. Developing relationships with young people isn’t hard. Contrary to popular belief, young people welcome and desire **real** relationships with adults who do not see them as projects or problems to be solved but as brothers and sisters in Christ.

One young person in our research gave this testimony: “You know, this woman at church has just continuously reached out to me. She sent me a note the other day - like a handwritten note - that said, ‘Hey, I am glad we are getting to know each other. I am happy you are in my life, and I can’t wait to get to know you more in ministry and just as friends.’ It was very unnecessary; it was outrageous. Yet welcome.”

When we work together to pursue our younger generations who are leaving the Church in droves (one million a year), we can stem the tide and help young people like the next Steve to discover their identity in Christ, their place in the body of Christ and their mission of sharing the love of Christ. May it be so.