

HOT-WIRED TO HELP

NOVEMBER 24, 2019 SERMON

I was on vacation this week. But I forgot when I scheduled the vacation that I had signed up for a training event on Monday night, so I spent the first night of my vacation at a church being trained to be an active bystander.

An active bystander is someone who not only witnesses a situation, but takes steps to speak up or step in to keep a situation from escalating or to disrupt a problematic situation. (<https://www.luc.edu/safetynet/resources/bystander/>). It's about creating a distraction for the person in trouble that helps them get out of an escalating situation. And it's about actually being present and paying attention when you're out in the world.

The trainer told us this powerful story from Ann Arbor, Michigan circa 1998. This story was new to me because in 1998, I was a college student that read old newspapers for research projects but didn't read current ones. So in Ann Arbor in 1998, the KKK, the Ku Klux Klan, held a public demonstration. And at that demonstration, there were protestors, protesting the Ku Klux Klan. The police put a line between the KKK and the protestors to help

keep people safe, to keep them away from each other. Both parties could be there, but they had to stay away from each other to maintain peace.

At one point, a man from the KKK side, a man whose outfit and tattoos marked him as someone who believes in white supremacy, crossed the line. He went over it, onto the side of the protestors. As you can imagine, once the line was crossed, the peace was broken, and the man was attacked by protestors. An 18 year old young woman named Keshia Thomas, standing on the side of the protestors, a young Black woman, threw herself on top of the man. She threw herself on top of this white man being attacked, this man who had chosen to cross the line and break the peace, and the attack stopped.

When interviewed about her actions, Keshia said it felt like "two angels picking my body up and laying me down." She didn't think about it. She didn't sit back and watch or join in the fight. She threw herself onto the man and stopped the violence even though she knew he might not have done the same for her. She said, "...

violence is violence – nobody deserves to be hurt, especially not for an idea.”

The class I was in on Monday did not advocate throwing our bodies on top of people, but it did teach us basic ways to get involved when something is going wrong for someone instead of sitting back, as people often do, and clucking about it.

Sitting in this church, taking part in this training, I couldn't help thinking about Jesus. I was thinking about how Jesus acted when he found people being picked on by other people, and this story came to mind:

John 7:53-8:11: *Then they all went home, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.*

At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

“No one, sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Jesus is teaching when a woman who has been caught sinning is brought to the Temple courts, and Jesus is asked if they are supposed to follow the law and stone her. She is, by law, a social outcast, and they are, by law, attacking her. And they're also using it as a way to justify attacking Jesus. By now, they know about Jesus. They know he doesn't take

part in stonings. They know He's going to stand up for this woman, this law-breaker, this social outcast. And they're gonna get Him for it. The scripture tells us it was all a trap, a trap for Jesus so they could accuse Him of breaking or ignoring the law.

As they push Jesus, Jesus starts writing in the dirt. He's not fighting. He's not clucking. He's not adding anything to the discussion, really, except a distraction. Which, by the way, is a really, really good way to be an active bystander. Under their tradition, the oldest accuser would have started the stoning. But when Jesus tells them that the one without sin can start the stoning, the crowd peels off, the older ones first, the younger ones later, until it is only Jesus and the woman they were attacking. Jesus doesn't condemn her, but encourages her to go lead a better life. Jesus, if interviewed after the fact might have said, “...violence is violence – nobody deserves to be hurt, especially not for an idea.”

After we heard the story and learned the basic skills of active bystanding, the trainer announced that we were going to spend 45 minutes doing role plays in small groups. That's the point at which I wanted to let everyone know I was officially on vacation and wasn't supposed to be at something like this. I did NOT want to do role playing, especially when it was explained to us that we had to pick three scenarios off of a page they provided, and each one of us had to play the attacked person, the bystander, and the aggressor.

It was so completely uncomfortable. I had to get between a man attacking a woman for wearing a hijab. I had to be a Latina woman yelled at by a store clerk for not speaking English. And I had to yell at a man in a wheelchair for slowing everybody down. It was not fun. But it wasn't meant to be fun. It was meant to teach us to react and distract instead of standing by and clucking. To distract, to engage, to help. Like Jesus would every time He saw someone getting picked on. It was uncomfortable, but we learned some things about bystanding and ourselves.

The next day, I walked into a convenience store. It was during rush hour and it's right on South Campbell, so you see a lot of cars pull in

there that are having car trouble. I had my eye on a smoking minivan when I walked into the store, to find a group of people clucking. And by clucking, I mean they were standing around, looking concerned, and saying “Oh dear. We should really do something. That doesn’t look safe. I wonder if he knows. Somebody should do something. Oh my. That’s terrible.” And I realized the guy parked beside the smoking minivan was pulling out of the parking space with a shredded tire. Into heavy traffic.

I didn’t think. I ran. I pushed open the door, sped across the parking lot, waved the guy down. He was over 80. He looked really upset. I asked him if he knew about his tire, and he told me he was heading to the tire shop that’s about a block away. I asked him if he needed help, and he just thanked me for caring enough to check on him. And then he drove off like a three legged dog. He wasn’t being attacked, but he was in danger and potentially dangerous to others.

When I went back toward the gas station, a man thanked me. I told the people inside what he said, everyone breathed a sigh of relief. When I got to the counter, the lady was still talking about him, and I told her what I knew from him. She looked at me like I had grown a second head. “You just went out there and stopped him?”

Yeah, but I probably wouldn’t have done that if I hadn’t had to do the silly role play the night before. I probably would have stood there and clucked. The practice with the group the night before hot-wired me to react to people in trouble. It bypassed all my social training to “tend your own knitting” and “men can be dangerous” and “it’s not safe to run across a busy convenience store parking lot.” But the role play had turned off all of those things, to be present in public moments, and to help when I could.

As I sat with that all week, I thought about us, as a community. About the ways in which we help each other when we’re in trouble. If we’re picked on. If circumstances get hard. And I thought that maybe this is our practice round. Not a role play, but a safe space to learn to be present in a crowd of people, chances to run towards each other

instead of away, to learn to act on behalf of instead of to stand back and cluck as we are so often more comfortable doing. I thought about the feedback I have received about our initiative to hold one other person in prayer through the week, how it has made some people’s lives better to know they were being prayed for. But most of the feedback we have gotten is that it makes people’s lives better to know they are praying for someone else. Because there’s something so Jesus in it, isn’t there, to focus on someone else for moments each day, to be responsible, to lift someone else up? And maybe that’s one of the reasons Jesus pushed for Christian community — so we could help each other and so we had a place to practice what the world needed from His followers, to do what He did. Not to stand back, but to step forward. Maybe Christian community could hot wire us to help others.

So this week, the card invitation is different. The last few weeks have been kind of like a practice round. We’re going to develop a specific card for this every week that gives you more options. But for now, this week, we write our names on one side of the card. We write the name of someone we’d like to help in some way on the other, someone that’s not here, someone out in the world. When you get the card, you pray for both sides of the card, you pray for your church family member and for the person they’re worried about. We’re stepping out into the world with our prayers.

Keshia Thomas never saw the man she protected again. But a few months later, a kid found her in a coffee shop and thanked her for saving his dad’s life. When his dad passed away a few years later, he called Keshia, put his 12 year old sister on the phone, and told Keshia that if it hadn’t been for her actions in that crowd in 1998, his sister wouldn’t be in the world. She didn’t just save one life. She saved two. Because somewhere, in her family, in her church, in her community, she learned to listen. She learned to pay attention. She was hotwired to help.

Jesus never stood back. He always stepped forward, towards the people who needed Him. May our life together hotwire us to help those Jesus would help. Amen.