

First Class Love; Third Class Ticket

Sterling UMC
July 11, 2010
Luke 10:25-37

This week 90 members of our congregation left the comfort and security of their homes for a strange place, gave up their air conditioned offices for 100 degree heat and humidity, swapped a week of vacation for a week of work, exchanged their comfortable bedroom and mattress for a tent and a sleeping bag, spent long hours on the road and in the air, helping and ministering to people they had never met. Why? Because they have begun to understand and to practice a very important truth. Although God gives us a first class love we have been given a third class ticket. What do I mean by that? Well let me try to explain.

In the golden days of settling the old west, one of the major means of transportation was the stagecoach. But did you know that stagecoaches had three different kinds of tickets – first-class, second-class, and third class? A first-class ticket meant you could sit down. No matter what happened, you could remain seated. If the stagecoach got stuck in the mud, or had trouble making it up a steep hill, or even if a wheel fell off, you remained seated because you had a first-class ticket.

A second-class ticket meant that you could sit down until there was a problem, and then you had to get off until the problem was resolved. You got off, stood to the side, and watched somebody else fix the problem. When the situation was corrected, you could get back on the stagecoach and take your seat again, because you had a second-class ticket.

A third-class ticket meant that you could sit down until there was a problem, and then you had to *get off and push!* You had to put your shoulder to it and help solve the problem, because you had a third-class ticket.

This week as I spent a good bit of time reflecting and praying about this concept while on the mission trip to Jamaica, I realized that these are precisely the ways various people relate to the church. Some think they have a *first-class ticket*, and they just sit there and expect to be catered to, waited on, pampered. Others think they have a *second-class ticket*, and they ride along until there is a problem. Then they become detached spectators. They get off, stand to the side, and watch somebody else fix it.

Still others (and thank God for them) think they have a *third-class ticket*. They ride along until something goes wrong, or they see a need that needs to be met, a ministry that needs to be accomplished, a mission that needs to be fulfilled, and then they get off and push! They address the problem creatively, they work on the situation productively, and they help to fix it or to make it happen. They devote their energies to the immediate task of solving the problem. They roll up their sleeves and get the job done.

Now, these three ways of relating to the church are really not new. They are as old as the Bible itself. In fact, they were so pronounced in the time of Jesus that one of his most famous parables addressed this very situation. That is what the parable of the Good Samaritan is all about.

The priest and the Levite in the story thought they were privileged. They didn't want to

get their hands dirty. They didn't travel "tourist," much less third class. They were important people, and they didn't need to get smudged up by the problems of the world. It was all about them. "Let someone else see to it" —that was their motto.

But the Good Samaritan realized that he had a third-class ticket, so when he encountered the problem, when he comes upon this person in need, he knew exactly what he was supposed to do. He got off and helped solve the problem, put his shoulder to it and brought healing, rolled up his sleeves and went to work. That's what third-class ticket-holders do. They don't mind dealing with the difficulty. They don't mind moving out of their comfort zone and getting their hands dirty. They don't mind taking a risk or getting involved. That goes with the territory when you have a third-class ticket.

That's what made the Good Samaritan "good," wasn't it? It was indeed his goodness! He was willing to help, anxious to heal, eager to serve, ready to love! He was bold enough to deal with the problem in a creative, redemptive way. He didn't just sit there and let someone else see to it. He didn't just stand off to the side and critique the way others were dealing with the difficulty. No! He felt responsible, and he addressed that troublesome situation lovingly in the spirit of Christ. And that's why, to this day, we call him the *Good Samaritan*. Third-class ticket-holders are indeed good people to have around.

Jesus taught us that in this parable, and also in many other places. Again and again he said it: In the Kingdom of God, those who act privileged will be last, but those who serve will be first! Those who rush to the front and act exalted will be called down, but those who are humble servants will be lifted up. He was saying, "I am among you as one who serves—go and do likewise." That was the mind-set of Jesus. Time and again, we hear him saying this, and we see him doing it. Remember that earlier he had gone into the wilderness to think through the meaning of his life and the method of his ministry? What kind of Messiah would he be? That was the question he was grappling with! And he was tempted to claim a first-class ticket, to go the route of power and pleasure and privilege. But NO! He chose instead the way of the suffering servant. He chose a third-class ticket!

Having made that choice, he went directly to the synagogue and read aloud to the people the verses from Isaiah that were to become the theme of his life: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor . . . release to the captives . . . sight to the blind . . . to set at liberty those who are oppressed."

Now, what was he saying? Simply this: No privileged seat for me! I have accepted a third-class ticket! And now I'm going to tackle these hard problems!

In the life and ministry of Jesus, we see something very important—that God gives us *first-class love*, but a *third-class ticket*. When trouble comes, when needs arise, when problems emerge, in the face of great needs, where people are hurting, where children are suffering, where families languish in poverty, where people are oppressed, where there is human suffering, we must be willing to get off and push, we must roll up our sleeves and go to work if we want to live in the Spirit of Christ. Dare I ask you this morning, what type of ticket do you hold? What type of attitude, what mind set do you exhibit and display?

The First-class Ticket Mind-set

Do you feel as if you have first-class tickets. You expect to be catered to and waited on: “Let someone else do the dirty work, not me!”

One thing that becomes glaring obvious to me each time I visit Jamaica as I just did is that in general we Americans treat people from other countries or cultures with disdain and contempt. We can be condescending and arrogant. In this country, we *expect* to be pampered like that when we go to a restaurant, and if we are not treated with excellent service, we are disappointed and we get angry. It’s part of what we call our “cater culture”.

However, we must be careful not to let that cater—culture mind-set cloud our understanding of the real purpose of the church. We join the church to become God’s servant people, not God’s privileged people; God’s work force, not God’s pampered people.

I’ve thought of a great sermon title I haven’t used yet, but it seems to fit here: “Are You Standing on the Promises or Just Sitting on the Premises?” Some people relate to the church with this mind-set. They sit idly on the premises, because somehow they have the mistaken notion that they have a first-class ticket! So they just sit there and expect somebody else to do the work.

The Second-class Ticket Mind-set

Or maybe you feel you have a second-class ticket. You’re willing to ride along, enjoying the journey, until some difficulty, problem, or need arises. Then you bail out, stand to the side, become a detached spectator. Now, while you stand there watching others work to solve the problem, there is an added temptation—the temptation to become a Monday-morning armchair quarterback, to criticize the way the situation is being handled:

- They’re doing that all wrong!
- Would you look at that?
- That group couldn’t organize a two-car parade!
- If you ask me, I wouldn’t do it like that!

That’s the way the spectator mind-set works. They stand and watch, talk and critique, but they don’t help! Like the priest and the Levite, they move quickly to the other side, thinking it is not their responsibility to address the problem.

“I don’t want to get involved, so I’ll stand aside and wait until somebody else fixes this.”

But that is not the Christian response to trouble! That is not the way our Lord taught us to deal with difficulties. As a matter of fact, that way of relating to the church and to life is, at best, not helpful; at worst, it’s even *dangerous*.

The point is clear—we can’t bail out or run away. We can’t detach ourselves and stand to the side. We can’t ignore the troubles of the world. We can’t just wait around, expecting others to roll up their sleeves and correct the situation for us. If we are to live in the spirit of Christ, we must face our problems and deal with them redemptively.

The Third-class Ticket Mind-set

Or do you live and behave in such a way that it is obvious that you hold a third class ticket?

This week I have witnessed firsthand this third-class ticket mentality from the mission team members I was honored to serve along side. I have read and heard the many others stories and accounts of how our other teams have embodied this spirit as well. I am so thankful that our congregation is really beginning to embrace what this means. And it is not just on the mission trips, I see this servant mentality all around in the life of our church, it is beginning to permeate the fiber of who we are as a church.

In our families, in our businesses, in our nation, and especially in our church, we need people who are willing to work, anxious to help, ready to love, eager to serve. We need people who are determined to be part of the *solution* rather than part of the *problem*. We need people who are quick to “get out and push” when we are stuck in the mud or when a friend or neighbor stands in need of assistance.

My friends there is a world outside of our walls that is in need. Do we hear their cries? Do we feel their pain? Do we see their suffering? Do we understand their needs?

Can we afford to sit idly by and enjoy all of the benefits that Jesus Christ and His church has to offer and do nothing? Can we turn a deaf ear to their cries? Can we ignore their call for help? Can we pretend that the needs don't exist?

NO! Why? Because the Scriptures make it abundantly clear, through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, that God does indeed give us a *first-class love*, but he also gives us a *third-class ticket!*