Book 13

Sunday September 30, 1984

"THE MYSTERY OF DOING WHAT'S RIGHT" Luke 10:25-37

A few weeks ago a meeting took place in Washington D.C., that inquired into a simple yet deep mystery. Why do some people during the meanest political times and under the most terrible political threats, do a morally correct and righteous thing?

This particular meeting was sponsored by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, set up by Congress in 1980, to commemorate Hitler's victims. At the initiative of Sister Carol Rittner, teacher of Holocaust studies at Mercy College in Detroit, the Council held a meeting it called "Faith in HUMANKIND: Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust." Among the participants was a group from the unknown number of non-Jews who saved Jews from imprisonment and death at the hands of the Nazis. The conference underlined the fact that the true heroes of this world are often unnoticed and are ordinary faithful people.

Some of these people were present and for the first time told their stories to the conference and the oral historians who were there. Each one was dramatic enough; the series of them was awesome. Here are a few of the stories in brief form.

*In Belgium, Alice Schiffer shielded some 20 Jewish children from the Nazis and smuggled supplies to Jews hiding in the countryside. For this she was ultimately arrested by the Gestapo.

*In Czechoslovakia, the Army officer, Peter Vicko issued Jews false documents that protected them from capture.

*In Germany, Martha Dreissen ran a business for her Jewish employer who had fled; when it was bombed out she joined the Jewish woman in hiding.

*Herman Frederick Graebe, a construction engineer for the German railroad, saved 300 Jewish workers by leading them through Nazi territory to the protection of the American Army.

*Igancy and Helena Chorazyczewski hid 4 Jewish boys in their barn in Poland, for years; when the couple were finally

sent to forced labor in Germany, they took one of the boys with them as their own son.

*Sometimes even more astonishing, the heroism was collective. There was a French community which sheltered thousands of Jews during the war. And there was an Italian village which hid 100 Jewish children and saved their lives.

What made these people act differently from others who had the chance to do the right thing, but did not?

These rescuers were not "important people" versed in the complex subtleties of business or politics. To all outward appearances they were ordinary. They did what seemed to them quite simply the right thing to do. And they risked their lives in doing it.

One woman put it this way: "A dozen Jews were going to be liquidated, so I hid them." She was a housekeeper for a German officer. She went on to say, "my mother taught us to have open hands, open ears and open hearts."

As I read about these ordinary people doing extra-ordinary things, I remembered another woman I had read about several years ago. In 1942, Natalia Abramovitch lived in the village of Radonsk in Southwestern Poland. The Nazis were rounding up Jews, putting them on railroad cars and shipping them east. There came to her home a Jew named Michael Steinlauf, asking for shelter for himself, his wife and their two small children and for his sister and her husband. Natalia took them all in and hid them in her attic. She kept them hidden there for over a year.

She needed more food now that she had six people living with her, but she was afraid to go to the gocery store and suddenly start buying so many extra supplies. So she started a garden in her backyard and raised most of the food herself. Throughout all that year she seldom left the house and she never let anyone enter for fear that the family would be discovered.

Then the family became apprehensive, afraid that one of the children would cry out during a search or that something would give them away. And so they decided to separate and look for other hiding places. Michael Steinlauf stayed

with Natalia; and the others went elsewhere. Each of those who left was later found and killed by the Nazis. He alone survived.

A few weeks after the others had left, there came the inevitable knock on the door that had been expected and feared for so long. The Nazis had come. Quickly she locked the attic door and whispered to Michael to slip out the window and run for his life. Then she delayed the Nazis for as long as she could by rummagin in drawers to find the key to the attic.

Michael Steinlauf escaped. But Natalia Abramovitch was arrested and put on trial, accused of the crime of harboring Jews. She was found guilty and sentenced to be shot. Then for some reason, perhaps because she was of German ancestry, her sentence was changed to life imprisonment. She was sent to one prison camp and then to another and finally she ended up in the Ravensbruk concentration camp where she stayed until she was released at the end of the war.

After living in a displaced persons camp near Hamburg for awhile, she somehow made her way to the United States and St. Louis. She lived there in obscurity and poverty.

In 1971, the local Jewish Federation in St. Louis, received a cable from Israel, asking for help in locating Natalia Abramovitch. Michael Steinlauf had survived the war and had found his way to Australia. There he heard about the creation of Yad V'Shem in Israel, the Israeli memorial to the 6 million Jews who died in the Holocaust. There is a garden in Yad V'Shem, called the Avenue of the Righteous. In that garden are a number of lovely trees, and at the foot of each tree there is a plaque. These plaques carry the names of those persons who risked their lives in order to rescue Jews during the Holocaust. Michael rememberd the woman who had saved his life and he wanted her name to be on a plaque on the Avenue of the Righteous.

She was located in St. Louis, and later that year, Michael Steinlauf came from Australia, to be with her when she received the award. All those who were present that night and who saw Natalia Abramovitch and Michael Steinlauf embrace after their long separation will always remember the scene.

What makes individuals like Natalia do what she did?

Jesus told a parable about an individual who did what was right while others didn't. And he crossed cultural and religious barriers to do it. We know the story as the parable of the Good Samaritan.

A traveler was on his way to Jericho, and while on the road was robbed and beaten and left in the ditch to die. A priest who came down that same road later, saw the injured traveler but acted as if he didn't see him and continued on his way. A Levite did the same. Supposedly the priest and the levite were the most religious people of their time.

Then another person came by on that same road and when he saw the injured traveler, he had compassion, gave him first aid and then took him to the nearest inn and took care of him. The next day, he told the innkeeper, "take good care of this man and whatever more you spend, I will pay you." The man who had compassion was a Samaritan and the Samaritans were considered by the Jews of that day to have the wrong kind of religion.

The parable doesn't spell it out, but the implication is that the injured traveler was a Jew, and for a Samaritan to help a Jew was almost unheard of. Or for that matter for a Jew to help a Samaritan was unheard of. There were cultural and religious lines that one didn't ordinarily cross.

The puzzling question in all these examples is: why do some do a righteous deed, while many others do Not? And the question becomes more personal for us--what would each one of us do in a similar situation?

In the early 1960's in this country, when black people began buying homes in previously all white neighborhoods, there was often violence against them. We were living south of Chicago, and I remember that one night someone set fire to the house of a black family that had moved into one of the previously all white suburbs. Fortunately, the fire was put out before too much damage was done.

There was one white man from that neighborhood who did a righteous thing. The next day, after work, he took his tools and went to that house to help the family with

repairs. He was the only one in the neighborhood with that kind of courage and compassion. He was ostracized by his neighbors for his actions.

Again, the mystery; why do some do a righteous thing, while others do not? Here are some possible answers.

1. First of all, those who have compassion, who have the courage to do a righteous deed, see everyone, no matter who they are, no matter what color skin, or what ethnic background, or what religious affiliation or nationality, as neighbors, as brothers and sisters. They know, as Jesus put it, "as you have done it unto one of the least of these, you have done it unto me."

Thomas Merton once said, "The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings, which are all part of one another and all involved in one another."

Those who act on behalf of others have a global human perspective rather than a narrow national or ethnic group perspective. This was certainly true of the Samaritan in the parable. He didn't care who it was that was hurt in the ditch--Jew, gentile, black, white, female, German, Russian--these labels are only that--labels, adjectives. The injured traveler was a human being, a brother and he needed help.

Thomas Carlyle told a story of an Irish tenant farmer who died and left a widow and three little children. The man who owned the farm needed the house to get another field hand, and so this poor widow was literally turned out into the road with no resource whatsoever for herself and her family. She went to the nearest town and began to go from door to door explaining her plight and offering to do any work to provide for her children. Person after person turned her away, saying, "I have problems of my own. What happens to you is of no concern to me."

After four days of no food and sleeping out of doors, the youngest child's body was weakened and she woke up with a burning fever. By noon all three of the children were sick and before the sun went down this little neglected family was the center of an epidemic of diptheria that spread to the whole town. Only at that point did it become

clear that this woman's plight was the concern of the larger community. Their failure to deal with the problem at one point meant they had to deal with it later on in a worse form.

Those who have compassion, who are willing to do a righteous thing know deep down that we are all related--that society and the world are inter-dependent.

2. Secondly, not only do those who do a righteous thing have compassion, they also have courage! They do not give in to peer group pressure. They are not afraid of going against the prevailing attitudes of those around them. They are able to rise above the prejudices and narrow attitudes of their time. They are not afraid of being criticized or ostracized for doing what is right, for showing compassion.

One of the most enduring memories I have of my mother is that she had this kind of courage and compassion. When I was in high school, there was a young girl several years younger than I who was a close friend of one of my younger sisters. This young girl became pregnant at about age 16, and decided to keep the baby.

IT was a difficult time for her. Many of her friends deserted her. In about her seventh month of pregnancy, my mother said, "I don't care what other people think or say, this young mother-to-be needs love and support in her condition. So my mother, with the help of several of my sisters, planned and carried off in a first-class way a baby shower so that the young mother-to-be would have some badly needed baby items and so that she could experience the support of others in her situation.

Our Christian faith calls us to act and live like neighbors to one another because we are neighbors and that means doing what is right on behalf of and to others even though it is often unpopular and difficult. That takes both compassion and courage. Amen.