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No Innocent Bystanders

Obadiah 1:10-15

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In the last few weeks there have been several inspiring stories of people coming to the aid of total strangers. An Associated Press story (by Nahal Toosi), on January 13, 2007 described how New York City had another subway hero to brag about. "An off-duty emergency medical technician saved a woman who apparently intended to throw herself in front of a subway train in Brooklyn, almost ending up on the tracks as the woman tried to fight him off, the fire department said, *"It was pretty close,"* 38-year-old Daniel Fitzpatrick said Friday of his near-encounter with an oncoming train. *"It was too close for me, put it that way."*

The Thursday rescue came just over a week after 50-year-old Wesley Autrey saved a young man, and himself, from an oncoming train by placing his body over the teenager in a pit between the tracks. Autrey was recognized during the President's State of the Union Address. Fitzpatrick found himself similarly thrust into danger as he was headed home to Franklin Square on Long Island. He was wearing his FDNY jacket when someone at the Flushing Avenue stop on the J line tapped him on the shoulder and alerted him to an apparently distraught woman. *"FDNY, I think this lady is going to jump,"* Fitzpatrick said the stranger told him. Fitzpatrick said he tried to get the woman's attention, but she walked away. Not long afterward, he saw her climbing down to a utility catwalk near the tracks at the elevated station, just as a train was coming. He went after her, grabbing her and keeping her pinned to a railing on the side of the track bed. The woman kept pushing him back, and the train nearly hit his head, he said. Another stranger grabbed his head and protected it. Police arrived on the scene of the incident and took the woman to a hospital. Officials Friday said they had no information on the woman's condition. Fitzpatrick *"displayed great courage in the face of danger and saved a woman from certain death,"* Fire Chief Salvatore Cassano said Friday in a release. *"He, and the civilian who assisted, should be commended."* He said he didn't know who the man was who helped protect his head. *"I thanked him, but I've been trying to reach out to him to thank him in person,"* he said. *"I really appreciate what he did for me."* Why do people do things like that and take such risks for people they don't even know?

The February 2007 edition of National Geographic Magazine includes an interview with one of the world's most important scientists, Francis Collins, leader of the Human Genome Project and also author of *The Language of God* in which he describes

the scientific basis for his faith in God. In the interview he says, “Some people sacrificially give of themselves to those who are outside their group and with whom they have absolutely nothing in common. Such as Mother Teresa, Oskar Schindler, many others. That is the nobility of humankind in its purist form.”¹

Today’s scripture from the prophet Obadiah is not about “the nobility of humankind in its purist form.” In fact, it is about just the opposite. The Book of Obadiah is the shortest book in the OT and one of the least read. There aren’t a lot of lovely framed calligraphy prints of Obadiah. You won’t find, *Everything I Needed to Know About Being a Christian I Learned from Obadiah*, in any Christian book store. It was probably written in the 6th century before Christ. The events referred to would have been the Babylonian campaign against Jerusalem (605-585 B.C.) which included a siege and the destruction of most of the city in 586 B.C.. Obadiah, whose name means, “Servant of the Lord,” was preaching to a group of people that included survivors of that disaster, most of whom would have lost loved ones, homes, and most of their property in the attack, who were returning to their homeland almost 50 years later. While many decades had past since those terrible days, the memories of the people were still vivid about how their neighbors the Edomites had acted. Not only had the Edomites not come to the aid of the people of Jerusalem and Judah. They had done exactly the opposite and grievously exploited and abused them in their time of need. Obadiah states strongly the wrongs done by the Edomites to their brother Jacob and the judgment of God on their behavior. He calls the Edomites and citizens of Judah brothers because they are descended from the same parents Isaac and Rebekah. Esau, the ancestor of the Edomites, and Jacob, the father of the Jews, were twin brothers who struggled and fought with one another in the womb, continued to fight once they came out and their descendents carried on the struggle for hundreds of years. Listen as Obadiah describes all that the Edomites should not have done and the consequences that will result. Obadiah 10-15,

“For the **slaughter and violence done to your brother Jacob**, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever. On the day **that you stood aside**, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth, and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, **you too were like one of them**. But *you should not have gloated over* your brother on the day of his misfortune;

¹ National Geographic, February, 2007, page 39.

*you should not have **rejoiced over** the people of Judah on the day of their ruin;
you should not have **boasted** on the day of distress.*

*You should not have **entered the gate** of my people on the day of their calamity;
you should not have **joined in the gloating** over Judah's disaster on the day of his
calamity;*

*you should not have **looted his goods** on the day of his calamity.*

*You should not have stood at the crossings to **cut off his fugitives**;*

*you should not have **handed over his survivors** on the day of distress.*

For the day of the Lord is near against all the nations.

**As you have done, it shall be done to you;
your deeds shall return on your own head."**

The hostility between the Edomites and Obadiah's people was ancient even in the 6th century B.C. From the book of Genesis through the Minor Prophets, the Old Testament is filled with passages about the bitter enmity between the two peoples, even though they shared a common ancestor and were technically relatives. (See the passages at end of sermon if you're interested in more background reading). The Edomites, who lived in the red cliffs to the southeast of Judah, took full advantage of the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in 586. The list of their wrongs is detailed and it gets progressively worse – they stood aside, gloated and rejoiced over the misfortune, disaster, and ruin of the people of Judah, not only that, they joined in entering the fallen city, looting the possessions of the defeated people, and worst of all, cut off the escape of the survivors and even handed some of them over to their enemies, the Babylonians. This was similar to the treatment of the Jews faced in some countries in Europe in the late 1930's and 1940's as the Nazi's extended their domination.

None of us wants to think of ourselves as behaving like the Edomites or people who collaborated with the Nazis, in exploiting people who experienced a disaster, like a war, or a hurricane, or other natural disaster or oppression at the hands of another group. In smaller ways, however, we can be like the Edomites. Have you ever found yourself of being in the position of gloating or rejoicing at someone else's misfortune? There are more than a few brother or sisters who have rejoiced at the misfortune of their siblings. Even those of us who are a little older, can be susceptible to being like the Edomites. You're driving down the highway and seeing an aggressive, erratic driver go by and then a mile or two down the road you see the same car only this time sitting

behind it is a state trooper with the blue lights flashing. There is a part of you that thinks, “Yeah! He got what was coming to him.” And you give a nice smile and a wave as you pass by.

However, if we are ever driving a little over the speed limit when suddenly we realize there is a trooper coming behind us, or we glance to our left as we go by one of those turnarounds in the median and there is a blue and grey trooper car, and we pull over and much to our great relief, the trooper just keeps on going or never pulls out after us, we are thankful. We are thankful because we want other people to get justice, to get what they deserve, but for ourselves we want mercy and grace – unmerited, undeserved favor. Their may be a little Edomite in all of us.

God’s judgment on the Edomites is “**As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head.**” That is a godly way of saying, “*what goes around, comes around.*” The same things that you rejoiced about happening to the people of Judah, the same things you did to them, will be done to you.

The importance of not standing aside in someone else’s moment of need or weakness is spoken about frequently in both the Old and New Testament. Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) is perhaps the best known passage. It is such a part of western culture that even the most diehard atheist knows what a Good Samaritan is. The irony is that in Jesus’ day, his fellow Jews would not have thought there was such a thing as a good Samaritan because they looked down upon the Samaritans as dogs in the same way the Edomites looked down upon the Jews. Jesus deflects a lawyer’s question about “*Who is my neighbor?*” and re-frames it to the more meaningful question, “*To whom will I be a neighbor?*”

In Jesus’ description of the Great Judgment in Matthew 25:31-46, those who are called righteous and blessed are those who, rather than standing aside, have responded proactively and generously to those they encountered who were in need of food or drink, clothing or shelter, or a caring visit and the gift of time. James 2:14-17 says, “*What good is it, brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works is dead.*”

Sadly, the ancient events described in Obadiah, a besieged city destroyed by war, fleeing refugees, looting, and ethnic hatred are still with us in many places around the world. Sarajevo, Yugoslavia, was the host city of the 1984 Winter Olympics and it

enjoyed the attention of the world. However, a mere eight years later began the siege of Sarajevo the longest siege in the history of modern warfare. It lasted from April 5, 1992 to February 29, 1996. It was fought during the Bosnian War between the forces of the Bosnian government, who had declared independence from Yugoslavia, and the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and Bosnian Serb Republika Srpska (RS) forces (VRS), who sought to destroy the newly-independent state of Bosnia and Herzegovina. An estimated 12,000 people were killed and another 50,000 wounded during the siege. Sarajevo was heavily damaged during those four years. The siege of Sarajevo was undoubtedly the worst and most catastrophic period in the city's history since World War I. From a pre-war population of some 500,000, the city was left with a mere 250,000 or so people.

The city used to be a model for inter-ethnic relations, but the siege of Sarajevo inspired dramatic population shifts. Aside from the thousands of refugees who left the city, an immense number of Sarajevo Serbs left as well. The percentage of Serbs in Sarajevo decreased from more than 30% in 1991 to slightly over 10% in 2002. Some Serbs that remained in Sarajevo were treated harshly by refugees returning to their homes. The scars of the siege of Sarajevo on its history may never fully disappear.

I remember reading a story that happened during the war that sums up the idea that there are no innocent bystanders. "A reporter was covering the conflict in the middle of Sarajevo, and he saw a little girl shot by a sniper. The reporter threw down his pad and pencil, and stopped being a reporter for a few minutes. He rushed to a man who had picked up the child and helped them both into his car.

As the reporter stepped on the accelerator, racing to the hospital, the man holding the bleeding little girl said, "Hurry, my friend, my child is still alive." A moment or two later, "Hurry, my friend, my child is still breathing." A moment later, "Hurry, my friend, my child is still warm." Finally, "Hurry, Oh, God, my child is getting cold."

When they finally got to the hospital, the little girl was dead. As the two men were in the lavatory, washing the blood off their hands and their clothes, the man turned to the reporter and said, "This is a terrible task for me. I must go tell her father that his child is dead. He will be heartbroken."

The reporter was amazed. He looked at the grieving man and said, "I thought she was your child." **The man looked back and replied, "No, but aren't they all our children?" Yes, they are all our children.** They are also God's children as well, and

the Lord has entrusted us with their care in Sarajevo and Somalia, in Brewster and Bagdad, Jerusalem and Jersey City, in New Orleans and New Bedford.

Living 27 centuries after Obadiah, we are aware of needs, disasters, wars, poverty, and oppression and abuse anywhere and everywhere in the globe, not just within 20 miles of where we live. The images of these needs are overwhelming, while our energy and resources are limited. We cannot do everything nor meet every need, but what we can do what we can, with what we have where we are.

There are no innocent bystanders. God calls us to be willing wisely and prayerfully, to reach out to our neighbors, those we know and those we may not know at all.

When we do, we may even find we are blessed in the process, that we have entertained angels and not realized it, we may even serve Christ himself in the form of a sister or brother.

Blessing:

“Do all the good you can, By all the means you can, In all the ways you can, In all the places you can, At all the times you can, To all the people you can, As long as ever you can.”

John Wesley, English religious leader (1703 - 1791), founder of the Methodists.

Further reading on the background on the relationship of the Edomites and Israel:

The Edomites were the descendents of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob. The history of the blood feud between the two peoples was old even in the 6th century B.C. The struggle begins with the twins in Rebekah’s womb (Genesis 25:19-34) and the countries they represent, Israel and Edom.

Genesis 27:38-45 Stealing a Blessing and a Desire for Revenge

Chapters 32 and 33 Jacob and Esau reunite.

Chapter 36 – The descendents of Esau.

Exodus 15:15 in the song of Moses and Miriam, the chiefs of Edom will be terrified by God’s deliverance of Israel.

Numbers 20:14-21 Edom denies Israel passage through their land.

Deuteronomy 2:1-6, 22 Passing through Edomite territory.

Deuteronomy 23:7 Who may enter the assembly of the Lord. “Do not despise...”

2 Kings 25

Psalms 137:7

Isaiah 34

Jeremiah 49:7-22 Quoted by Obadiah

Lamentations 4:21-22

Ezekiel 25:12-14, chapter 35 An Oracle against Edom

Joel 3:18-19

Amos 1:11-12

Malachi 1:2-4