

Can we all agree that Obadiah would make a lousy motivational speaker? Seriously, I have a sad story to tell you. At approximately 3:20 a.m. on the morning of March 13, 1964, twenty-eight-year-old Kitty Genovese was returning to her home in a nice, middle-class area of Queens, NY, from her job as a bar manager. She parked her red Fiat in a nearby parking lot, turned-off the lights and started the walk to her second floor apartment some 100 feet away. She got as far as a streetlight when a man grabbed her. She screamed. Lights went on in the 10-floor apartment building nearby. She yelled, “Oh, my God, he stabbed me! Please help me!” Windows opened in the apartment building and a man’s voice shouted, “Let that girl alone.”*

The attacker looked up, shrugged and walked-off down the street. Genovese struggled to get to her feet. Lights went back off in the apartments. The attacker came back and stabbed her again. She again cried out, “I’m dying! I’m dying!” And again the lights came on and windows opened in the nearby apartments. The assailant again left and got into his car and drove away. Genovese staggered to her feet as a city bus drove by. It was now 3:35 a.m. The attacker returned once again. He found her in a doorway at the foot of the stairs and he stabbed her a third time--this time with a fatal consequence. It was 3:50 when the police received the first call. They responded quickly and within two minutes were at the scene. Genovese was already dead. The only person to call, a neighbor of Genovese, revealed that he had phoned only after much thought and after phoning a friend. He said, “I didn’t want to get involved.” (THE NEW YORK TIMES, March 27, 1964, p. 38.)

I can remember discussing this incident in class when I was in college. The question was, “Why didn’t anyone come to her rescue? Were they too afraid? Was it simply because no one wanted to get involved? Was it because people wondered what a young woman was doing out so late? Did their pride deceive them?” As students of the social sciences, we wanted to learn why people act the way they do, or fail to act when they should.

As a result of this tragic incident, two social psychologists, Latané and Darley, began their research to identify the factors that influence why people may be reluctant to come to the aid of others. Their explanation has been called the “bystander effect” and says that an individual is less likely to provide assistance as the number of bystanders increases. In other words, if you think you are the only one available to help in an emergency, you will likely get involved and do something. But if you see others standing around, you will be less likely to act because you think someone else will do something.

What it really boils down to is the question, “How much responsibility do I have for my neighbor?” It is not a new question. Last month as I finished the sermon series from the letter of James I reminded us that after Cain killed Abel, he asked God, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The Bible’s answer, of course, is “Yes.” In the Gospel of Luke, when a lawyer asked, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus told him the story of the Good Samaritan. The conclusion we are to draw is that my neighbor is *anyone who is in need*. There are no innocent bystanders.

Obadiah the prophet hammers home that same point. Obadiah pronounces judgment on the country of Edom for standing by and allowing God’s people to be destroyed. The little book of Obadiah has only one chapter, but it takes on a really big topic: Pride. And its deceptiveness.

Let’s go back to when the story began. In Genesis 25, twins were born to Isaac and Rebekah. Their names were Jacob and Esau and if you remember the story you know that they struggled against each other from

the day of their birth. When they were grown, even though Esau was older, Jacob got the inheritance from his father Isaac, and his blessing, with the help of his mother's scheming. Needless to say that did not improve relationships between the two brothers. The feelings of hatred and hostility from that event stayed with them not only through their lives, but through the lives of their descendants. Those descendants eventually ended up in a little country called Edom, 15 miles wide and 70 miles long. And we can read about the hostility between those two nations throughout the OT.

- In 1 Samuel 14, Edom is listed as one of the enemies Saul fought against when he became king.
- In 2 Samuel 8, David subdued Edom when he became king.
- In 2 Kings 8 we read that Edom revolted against Israel.

And prophet after prophet spoke against Edom.

- Isaiah said that Edom was doomed to judgment in chapter 34.
- Jeremiah said God would bring calamity on Edom in chapter 49.
- Ezekiel said that God would lay their towns to ruin in chapter 35.
- Malachi predicted their destruction..

What did this country of Edom do to deserve all these words of judgment? The prophet Obadiah spells it out in verse 3. "*The **pride** of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rocks and make your home on the heights, you who say to yourself, 'Who can bring me down to the ground?'*" If you remember the history of the Old Testament, you know that because the Israelites sinned God allowed the Babylonians to come in and take them into exile. The Babylonians killed some. They took some as prisoners and carted them off to Babylonia. And then they totally destroyed Jerusalem, the center of their religious life.

So we ask what that has to do with Edom. Why should Edom be punished? This is why: During the time of that attack, Edom stood by while their neighbors in Jerusalem (also their blood relatives) were destroyed. Remember there are no innocent bystanders. Look at what Obadiah has to say about prideful Edom:

- v. 10. They have acted with violence toward their brother.
- v. 11. They stood aside and did nothing. They didn't lift a finger.
- v. 12. They gloated and rejoiced over their misfortune.
- v. 13. They even looted their goods.
- v. 14. They not only offered no help, they even turned people over to the Babylonians. What kind of brotherly concern is that?
- v. 15 says, "*As you have done, it shall be done to you.*"

What about today? We need to ask what message God might have for the church today from this short book of prophecy. Are there lessons we can take from Obadiah? I can think of two: First, as we have already seen, there are no innocent bystanders. From what we know, the people of Edom did not set out to destroy their neighbors, just as the neighbors of Kitty Genovese did not intend for her to die. According to the prophet Obadiah, the Edomites were bystanders, but not innocent. They stood by and watched as Babylonian soldiers entered Jerusalem. The Edomites may have been kind of glad to see it happen. Maybe in their pride they even said, "They deserve it." And by the time it was over, the Edomites themselves joined in the looting and even turned refugees over to foreign troops. Obadiah says this was wrong. They should have stood beside their neighbors instead of doing nothing as they suffered. When a neighbor of ours suffers, our place is at their side.

Taking it a little further, in Matt 25 Jesus said there will be a final reckoning of those who fail to stand with the hungry and thirsty, the sick and the naked, the “least of these” as Jesus called them. I don’t think the church is guilty of robbing and treating people cruelly, but we need to ask how often we have stood by while bad things happen, because we didn’t want to get involved.

Right now in the United States immigration has become a hot-button issue and I realize it is a very complex topic. But what is God’s message for the church? Should the church stand by without lifting a finger to help people who in some cases are refugees from countries ravaged by war? Both legal and illegal immigrants have come seeking honest work for an honest wage just as some of our own ancestors did a couple of generations ago. Should we act indifferently about their deportation and say they deserve it? Would we turn them over to the authorities? What is the God-like thing to do? When it comes to these kinds of issues there are no easy answers; but neither are there innocent bystanders.

Most of you know that we have a special fund called the Good Samaritan Fund, in addition to the Deacons Fund, that is used to help people inside and outside the church in financial emergencies. It was on the benevolence calendar back in May, but donations can be made anytime. Some of you contribute to that fund regularly. Some of you have received help from that fund. This way of helping people in a crisis, no matter who they are, has been a part of the ministry of this church for a long time. It matches the second part of our mission statement: *to demonstrate God’s love through ministry and mission*. We struggle with how to provide the best help in these situations. On the one hand, with the money we offer we can’t make a big difference. On the other hand, when we see people in serious crisis situations, we can’t stand idly by. I know there may be people who say, “Well, they got themselves into this situation. They can find a way out of it.”

But, we believe that Jesus commands us to stand with those who are hungry and needy. And as a congregation we need to ask ourselves, is there more we could do to alleviate suffering of our neighbors? We know there are risks. Sometimes people have tried to con us and in our pride we could simply say, “We won’t do that again.” But the bigger risk is not doing anything and having to answer to Jesus on Judgment Day. *There are no innocent bystanders and the pride of our heart can deceive us*. That is clearly what Obadiah is saying.

But beyond that, *God is in control*. Obadiah wrote to people whose lives had been uprooted and who had seen unbelievable sadness. Psalm 137 describes their grief at being in a foreign land. Where was God in this difficult time? Eventually, some of these people were able to return from exile only to see their crumbled homes and to realize their hopes were shattered. Their lives were in shambles. They had lost everything. But by God’s grace they had survived. What was the message for them? Verse 18 reminds them that evil will be punished. The people of God will remain alive, but those who stood idly by, who contributed to their destruction will themselves be destroyed. The final chapter has not yet been written, but we know God’s justice will prevail.

You may be someone who has been beaten or battered, broken or shattered, but that is not the end of your story. Obadiah’s book ends with these words, “*And the kingdom shall be the Lord’s*.” And those words echo not only through the Old Testament, but through the New Testament as well when a prophet from Nazareth arrives on the scene and says, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*.” His words instill hope. This is my Father’s world. Even though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.

So when you wake up in the morning, dear friends, pray a prayer of thanks that God still rules...that God will not desert those who love their neighbors...and thanks be to God there is room for all of us in God's kingdom. The last word of Obadiah is, "*And the kingdom shall be the Lord's.*"

When that day arrives, all pride will fade away. Amen.

*Much of this sermon I have borrowed from Pastor Wes Richard and the INTERPRETATION Hosea-Micah Commentary by James Limburg, ©John Knox Press.