

Three Samaritans

by [Eugene H. Peterson](#) in the [July 29, 1998](#) issue

Several years ago, when my wife and I were living in Pittsburgh for most of a year, we set out to attend worship in a church where a friend was the pastor. We had never been there before, but I knew the general direction and thought I could find it. Pittsburgh is a city built on hills at the conjunction of three rivers. Few of the streets go in a straight line for very long. And you never travel very far without running into one of the three rivers and have to go looking for a bridge.

It was a beautiful spring Sunday, and we were relishing the sight and scents of the blossoming dogwoods and redbuds, the tulips and grape hyacinth. It was also a dangerous morning. Racial riots had broken out in Los Angeles, with much killing and looting, and had then spread alarmingly to other cities across the country. Pittsburgh was ripe for a riot. But danger was not uppermost in our minds at that moment; we were on our way to church, on our way, as Wendell Berry once put it in his accurate, pungent diction, “to practice resurrection.”

It happened that the Pittsburgh marathon was being run that day and many of the streets were blocked off for the safety of the runners. The streets I was familiar with weren't available. We were shunted onto detours and were soon hopelessly lost. The streets meandering through the unsymmetric hills had me totally disoriented. Then I noticed some street signs that I had heard named by a friend, Jody, who was a Young Life worker in a neighborhood of high crime and drug use. Jody had had lunch with my wife and me a few days before and told us of the two street murders that had taken place early that week. Now here we were, lost on those very streets.

We passed a few churches where people were assembling for worship. It occurred to me that I might stop and ask someone, but everyone seemed so purposeful, headed for a meeting with Jesus. Then I spotted three men sitting on the porch of a saloon. One was smoking a cigar, while the other two were chewing and spitting, waiting for the doors to open. On impulse I pulled off the road and told them I was lost and where I wanted to go. They conferred with one another, but couldn't agree on proper directions.

Then one of them, impatient with the wrangle, jumped into his car, an old, battered Cadillac, and called out, "Follow me." The other two tumbled into the back seat. He started off; I followed. He drove fast and erratically. There didn't seem to be much design in his route; he turned left and right and then left again. A confusing zigzag. We could see the men arguing over the route--gesturing and pointing.

It occurred to us that they might not be guiding us out of that neighborhood at all, but confusing us in preparation for robbing us and stealing our car. Pittsburgh is the car theft capital of North America--and what would be easier than robbing us? Should we dodge into an alley and escape?

Suddenly, the driver pulled to the curb, stepped out of his car and, with a sweeping gesture, directed us to the ramp of the bridge that would take us across the river and to our church.

We wanted to stop and thank him, but were swept into the traffic; his image in our rearview mirror was soon gone.

It only took us a matter of seconds to realize what had happened--we had been "taken on" by a good Samaritan. Three Samaritans, in fact--unkempt, unlikely Samaritans who were waiting for the saloon to open on a Sunday morning.