

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

“Who Is My Neighbor?”

By Eric Howell

Luke 10:25-37

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The well-known and well-loved story of the Good Samaritan is a clear mirror. When we look at it we see our reflection among the characters in the story and possibly in the expert in the law whose question to Jesus prompted this tale. And that’s not always a comforting thing because this parable, among all of Jesus’ parables, is so full of wisdom about the way we are, the way we want to be, and our fears and the calculations and evasions that arise from those fears just beneath the surface. We teach our kids to be afraid of strangers for what they might do to us, but it’s often our neighbors we fear the most because of what they might require of us. And that’s what prompted the inquiry from the lawyer.

Remember him? He’s a lawyer, skilled in getting to a precise definition, trained to draw contractual lines between what is expected and what is disallowed. His talent is to determine by the details precisely what is stipulated in any relationship. He comes to test Jesus. “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” In other words, what is required of me in my contract with God? What must I do? It might not quite be the bottom-line question of, “What can I get away with?” but it’s at least headed that direction. That’s what contracts are. They draw the lines between what is in and what is out; what is required and what I can get away with.

Jesus asks him, being an expert in the law and all, to recite the ancient wisdom about such matters. He, of course rightly responds with scripture. Jesus was probably proud for him in this. When Jesus Himself was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, He responded by quoting scripture. It is solid ground. But of course Satan quoted scripture right back at Him so just knowing the Bible isn’t all there is to it. The lawyer succinctly quotes from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” “Excellent,” Jesus says. “Now go do it.”

In these two scriptures, the lawyer has identified the inner and outer life. Love the Lord your God, love your neighbor. These two taken together give shape to the dance within each of us of what we often call our spiritual life and doing what we often call acts of service, or mission. We receive and we give. We close our eyes in prayer; we extend our hands in service. God says both are important and both are necessary. But as you would expect, it’s not quite that easy to figure out how to do that. And the man has a follow-up question.

How do I do it? What would you say God expects of me? I get “Love your neighbor as yourself. But who is my neighbor?” The way he was thinking about the question had a lot to do with a debate about whether your neighbor includes just the people living directly next door to you or whether it includes the people across the street. It’s like the conversation you and your spouse have about who to invite if you want to invite your neighbors over for dinner. Well, let’s invite the people on either side. What about the house across the street? Ok, them too. What about the people next to them? I don’t know. Maybe. And here it comes. When do we stop? Ask any bride and groom who are negotiating a wedding invitation list, and they get this. If I invite Cousin John, I have to invite Jane, Matilda, and Gertrude. If I invite Rob from work, I have to invite the whole office. Where does it stop? If I help one homeless man on the side of the road, do I help the next one? What about the one after that?

You hear the calculated reasonableness of the question? It’s the kind of question we ask . . . all . . . the . . . time. With limited resources and unlimited need, what do we do? When you can’t do everything, what do you do?

It's a question churches ask about what we call mission all the time. What can we do that makes any difference with what we have? To whom do we "owe" our mission? Who is our neighbor? How far do we take it? I mean, if a church decided to help every single person who we came across, what would happen to that church? Getting square on this question—who is my neighbor—is not necessarily a begrudging question. It's a question born out of experience and observation of life. And even more, if the neighbor is someone to be loved, not just helped, then they are to be given the very depths of who I am, not just a few left-over resources. The scripture says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." If the stakes are that high, and you take this passage seriously, then figuring out who my neighbor is becomes a significant question that has serious implications for how you live your life.

Too bad --- for what seems like such a good question, we never get an answer. Jesus doesn't give an answer to this question asked of Him. He doesn't provide a direct response; this one is your neighbor. This one's not. Instead he introduces unforgettable characters in one short story and leaves us with "Now go do likewise."

There's a man who has been robbed and beaten half to death by the side of the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Jesus says "the road going **down** from Jerusalem to Jericho." It certainly is down. Jerusalem sits on top of a mountain, 2100 feet above sea level. Jericho, 17 miles away, is the lowest city on earth. Near the Dead Sea, 846 feet below sea level, it is a winding, dangerous journey from up to down. In that journey, many have seen life's journey. Several church fathers saw in the road from Jerusalem to Jericho an allegory of the journey of humanity from heaven to hell. And in man by the road, Adam, all of humanity, lays half-dead, beaten, stripped. The man is otherwise unidentified. He could be a Roman soldier or the high priest or your next door neighbor. No one knows. He has had his identity beaten out of him. Some of us can relate. Life can be tough. Those hopes and dreams you had when you started out on the journey, thinking you were going even higher, have burned off like morning clouds. Sickness, failure, terrible decisions, or whatever leaves us beaten and bruised. What the world doesn't do, we finish the job. Most people beat themselves up more than any one else cares to.

But the man is lucky because a priest happens to be coming along down the same road. What good fortune to have a man of God come by in the right place at the right time. Except, something's wrong. The priest isn't kneeling to help this man who needs help, but he's walking right on by. Unfortunately, cynically, we aren't all that surprised. Phillip Yancey tells about a woman who spent a segment of her life in prostitution. Sometime after she had quit that way of life she was asked, "While you were hurting, looking for answers, and still prostituting, did you ever think about going to church? Her answer is an indictment, "Church? Why would I go to church? They would have just made me feel worse about myself."

He's shifting his eyes. Moving to the other side of the road, he doesn't want to get involved. He passes the hurting one by. Don't want to get too close. Don't want to be troubled. Don't want to be involved. Besides, what might happen to me if I help. I'm already busy enough. I already have enough responsibilities without taking on one more. My role is about higher things. Maybe the priest was an old, worn out, cynical pastor who'd grown cold. A younger priest full of energy and idealism might have acted differently -- right?

The preacher, Tom Long, shared that some years ago a famous experiment was conducted with seminary students. Researchers gathered a group of ministry students in a classroom and told them that each of them had an assignment. Their assignment was to record a talk about the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The thing was, the recordings were going to be done in a building on the other side of the campus, and because of a tight schedule, they needed to hurry to that building. Unbeknownst to the students, on the path to the other building, the researchers had planted an actor to play the part of a man in distress, slumped in an alley, coughing and suffering. The students were going to make a

presentation about the Good Samaritan. But what would happen, the researchers wondered, when they actually encountered a man in need? Would they be Good Samaritans? Well, no, as a matter of fact, they were not. Almost all of them rushed past the hurting man. One student even stepped over the man's body as he hurried to teach about the Parable of the Good Samaritan! The pastors passed him by.

But never fear. Jesus is going to relieve the problem, because a Levite comes down the road next. How fortunate. The seminary students dropped the ball. Good thing there's a School of Religion student coming. If the priests were the spiritual and liturgical leaders of the church, Levites, it seems, took care of the church in other ways. They were descendents of Levi, not of Aaron. Even though they were not priests, they were vital to the institution. They took care of the institution. They were the deacon board, the church council, the buildings and grounds committee. Even more, I think, they were the caretakers of the institutional identity of the church. Among them were the theologians. They were the academics.

Some of us noticed the other day in this story that the priest and Levite weren't walking together but each walking alone. This is what happens when the church and the academy, the preachers and theologians get separated. Together they might do well. Apart they both fail in God's mission. The theologian walks by. Just exactly like the priest, he passes by on the other side of the road and keeps on walking. Taking care of this man is not in the strategic plan. It's not part of the job description.

Both the Levite and priest were God's people. These were not random people, but guaranteed by Jesus to elicit a reaction to their cold-heartedness, to someone who was in great need. Ancient commentators saw allegorically the Law and prophets represented here; or anything that is supposed to help us but doesn't. We've found a lot like that haven't we? We've found a lot of things in life that were supposed to be there for us when we were hurting, but weren't. Goodness knows the church has passed by the other side plenty. But so have a lot of other things. Jobs left us empty. So did toys and pride. Everything we tried did not help when we needed it the most. We all come to know the experience of desperately needing someone or something to stop and help, and looking up only to see it all marching on as if we weren't there, leaving us behind.

It's time for the hero. In the one who would come next, many church fathers see Jesus Himself. When no one else would or could minister to broken, dying humanity, Jesus comes with healing we need.

In the story... around the corner comes a Samaritan, "as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion." It's hard to overstate the shock of a Samaritan being the good one in the story. He's not supposed to be there. He's not supposed to be the leading man. They are the butt of jokes, not the heroes of stories. They are the ones you pass by on the street without looking at, not the ones who kneel down with oil and wine and carry a hurting man to an inn and ensure his safety. Samaritans are punchlines not superstars. But here he is, unlike the others, full of compassion.

Compassion. *Splagnizomai*. Literally he was moved in his bowels, which is not what you think it means. It's the seat of powerful emotions, the most violent passions --- anger, and also love. Maybe it took both to cause him to stop --- anger and love. This same word is used to describe Jesus in Matthew 14 when Jesus looks over the crowd and has compassion for them. They are like sheep without a shepherd. It is the father's reaction to the prodigal son.

Compassion was what the priest and Levite did not have; neither had that flicker of fire-in-the-belly that moves you to act even when it might be dangerous, or not in your best, calculated interest. Maybe the priest had something of love in him; a strict, liturgically shaped love that went something like this: God loves those who are good and smites those who aren't. You get what you deserve in life. Poor bum. I'm glad God loves me. Maybe he

prayed when he got through the dangerous road to Jericho about how much God must love him that he didn't end up like that poor loser by the road, and thanked God for God's mercy and grace that he wasn't like that guy. But he didn't have God's love for this person right in front of him. Maybe the Levite had an idea of love, a concept of the theory of what love is. But it didn't move him to action. Maybe he thought the rest of the way down the hill about what the theories of utilitarian, duty ethics or virtue ethics would have to say about the man by the road. Maybe he had an idea of love of some sort, but no motivating passion.

Anger and Love --- anger --- at the injustice brought upon this man; at the wounds he suffers and did not deserve. Anger --- that people would treat another person like that. Anger --- that people can't walk their road in peace. Love --- moving love for the person who is right in front of you. It's only when we feel passion and selfless love for someone that we are moved enough to give of ourselves in sacrificial mission.

The Samaritan may be good, but he's not supposed to be a hero. In the story, the word good is never used to describe him. Mercy is, so is compassion. He did what any of us should do. Even the lawyer could understand that. But even getting that, we still might miss the shock of the crowd that day who were drawn into a story only to be thrown the nastiest of curve balls. It was not just a regular ol' Joe who stopped by. It was a Samaritan, a despised half-breed who had compassion on a stranger. And it didn't matter who that stranger was. It didn't matter where he was from, what he did for a living, what he did or didn't do for anyone else. It didn't matter if he was a good man or a bad man. He was a hurting fellow human, a stranger who is suffering, and who is now come into my life, not really an answer to the question, more an unforgettable image of who is my neighbor and whom should I love.