

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Bailey Payne

Who Do I Choose to Love?

Luke 10:25-37

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I grew up on a steady rotation of reading Brown Bear, Brown Bear, Chicka Chicka boom boom, and stories from my “Kids’ First Bible”. Do you know the kind of book I’m talking about? It takes a few headline stories from the Bible, takes out the extreme violence and other PG-13 scenes, adds a few illustrations, and voila you have a kids’ bedtime story book.

Mine was from the late 90s when it was super cool to have a locket or buckle on your book. I don’t know if that’s still a trend, but my bible had a bright green locket on the side that made it extra special. For as much as I remember the outside of this book, there’s really only one story I remember reading in it. It was my favorite— it was the Good Samaritan.

Giving it some serious thought, I would say this story is my first memory of being captivated and compelled by the gospel Jesus came proclaiming. But full confession, what I remember is not the story that was just read and performed. I remember a man being beaten up and left on the side of the road. And maybe there were two others that passed by, but I don’t particularly remember them. My main takeaway and what I loved, was that there was this man to whom a grievous injustice was done. He was beaten and robbed. And another man, the Samaritan, came along who didn’t owe this beaten man a debt, but out of compassion was moved to right the wrong. My heart swelled at the thought of that kind of love. And I remember this story coming around in children’s church where the lesson was that everybody is my neighbor.

And if all you take away is a story of compassion and universalizing your neighbor beyond geographical location and common interests and family bloodlines, then that is a great place to start.

But there is much more happening in this story. The thing is this story is told to critics and cynics with arrogant egos. I have a theory, that in order to understand how this story landed on its original audience, you have to have some criticism and cynicism and arrogance in you too. Luckily, I’m not 4 anymore and I have those things in plenty. So now when I hear this story I feel more of sting compared to the symphony of warm and fuzzies that used to swell in me as a kid.

We turn to our story. The person asking the questions in our story is not asking like an innocent child with a genuine spirit of curiosity. We have a lawyer putting Jesus to the test. Taking his questions like a surgical knife to the highest command of the Torah, to love the Lord your God... which I must admit, as one who likes clearly defined terms and boundaries and appreciates a good debate where we define our terms at the beginning, I don’t hate the lawyer’s question. I may not endorse the spirit he asked it in, but maybe I was asking that too... Who is my neighbor?

Before you jump to the quick whip of “everybody is my neighbor” listen to the story carefully.

A man gets beaten and robbed and left half-dead on his journey. First, our priest walks by and moves to the other side. Okay our top-ranking DH of religious professionals, just struck out. That’s okay, here’s our second string Levite, annnnnnd he strikes out looking too — moves to the other side of the road. Okay, Jesus, I see, you’re going to have the third-string benchwarmer, the Jewish lay person, come in and win the game. We get an underdog lesson

on status, leadership, and integrity. But our third passerby is not a Jewish layperson, or even a woman, or child. It's a Samaritan. It's the third-string benchwarmer from your rival town's basketball team that somehow made it in on your lineup. And it's him whom you don't think can hit a ball because he doesn't know a thing about baseball and he's from the team that you don't want to hit a ball, he wins the game with a walk-off home run.

You may be very familiar with the beef between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Samaritans come from the Northern tribes of Israel and when they were taken into exile intermarried with their oppressors. The Jews did not. The Jews have Jerusalem and the Samaritans have "their temple". To the Jew, the Samaritan is blasphemous, weak, and morally corrupt. They have turned their back on the God you remained faithful to.

By using a Samaritan in this story Jesus is subverting the identity the Jews have assigned to the Samaritans.

I would imagine not only do the Jews not *want* the Samaritans' love, their cheap, compromised love, but the Jews probably don't believe the Samaritans *have the capability* to love.

And Jesus lays it on thick about how well this Samaritan can love— the Samaritan bandages the half-dead man himself, pours out oil and wine, puts him on his own animal, takes him to an inn, gives two days' worth of wages, and offers to follow up with his actual presence and more money if needed. And nowhere does he ask if the man did something to get beat up or see if he is of any fault himself. The Samaritan just offers mercy. He just meets the needs in front of him, no questions asked.

It seems as though there is a question in the subtext— whom do you think *can be* a neighbor? Not just who is YOUR neighbor, but whom do you see as able to love. To love the people you fail to love. Or it is a reversal of the question. Who is my neighbor? Not whom do I have an obligation to love, but who loves me? What if this lawyer is meant to identify with the beaten man and has to accept the mercy of his enemy? What group of people have you written off as unable to love? Or whose love would be offensive to you to receive? No, I don't want it.

Now, this is where my 4-year-old self didn't understand all the subtleties of what is happening. I thought Jesus was making the point that the man who got robbed, the one in need, the vulnerable one is my neighbor. And he is my neighbor but Jesus asked, who was the neighbor *to* him?

In order to understand how the neighbor is defined in this story we need a quick little English grammar review: In a sentence, you can have a subject, a verb, and an object. The formula is subject does action to object. The sentence in question is love your neighbor. The lawyer wants the object defined— the one he needs to do the action to. Who is my neighbor? Who is the object of this sentence? When Jesus changes the question "Who was the neighbor TO him" he now changes the way we define neighbor. **A neighbor is not defined by anything about the person. It is defined by whom the subject decides to love.**

I would say we are pretty comfortable with removing any barrier to define our neighbor. Our neighbor is everyone. In theory, we are comfortable with that. It's hard to do and we still are growing in acting that out, but yes our neighbor is everybody. [pause] But are we okay with taking back the responsibility of us defining who our neighbor is? Still not defined by any characteristic about them, but defined by whom we actually love. It seems as though, we leave this story with a choice. Who is your neighbor? Well, who do you choose to love?

You see our lawyer tried to get direct the attention off himself and get particular with his term, and Jesus has taken us right back to the heart of this command— a command to love. Love God, love neighbor. You. You love God, you love your neighbor.

Jesus is certainly universalizing the term neighbor. Our lawyer friend here is looking to be justified. Most likely looking to define neighbor as Jews, people of his own ethnic group. People he lives near. But the only justifiable answer is about what is done, not labels about identity. The answer is cutting right through the heart of tribal, ethnic, and racial tensions. Your neighbor is everybody in your day-to-day that you choose to love.

I wonder why the priest and the Levite didn't stop? Before we quickly distinguish ourselves from being either of them in the story, let's consider all the factors. They are journeying from Jerusalem to Jericho, meaning they probably just finished a shift at the temple. This means they are most likely carrying with their payments, which come in the form of his food to live off of. If they come into contact with this man, who will probably die no matter what, all of their food is unclean and they won't be able to eat. That doesn't get justified in this story, but maybe we aren't so far away from the priest and the Levite if we think about it like that. To love would cost us food, or something from our job, or our time that we just don't have to give. Perhaps they were in a hurry. Perhaps they were too scared to stop because this road Jesus set the story on is quite a dangerous one. It's a steep road in the mountains, perfect for hiding spots for thieves, as we have already seen. And who knows, maybe this guy is just a decoy? Again, none of these are justified answers, but if we are going to know how to love our neighbors, shouldn't we know what would keep us from doing so? Fear. Hurry. Self-preservation. Fatigue.

And now with globalization and the digital age, I think we can add distraction, detachment, and ignorance to the list of things that might prevent us from loving our neighbors. Today we may not stop simply because we were so busy we didn't even see him lying on the road there. How much easier is it to watch Netflix than get to know your next-door neighbors and have them over for dinner? Jesus may have been making the term neighbor mean more, but he certainly doesn't make it mean less. In our present-day economic structures, we don't know who made our clothes or who grew our food because they are so far removed.

Dr. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda in her book *Resisting Structural Evil* says "Were someone to say to me, 'Cynthia shove the tribal people off of their lands in the Orissa province of India and kill the protesters because we need to mine bauxite from that land,' I would refuse. 'Cynthia, your next task is to evict this woman from her tiny apartment. Her wages don't cover the rent, and we will keep her at minimum wage in order to hold down the cost of your clothing and household goods.'" Were you or I asked to commit these deeds, we would exclaim, "no" crying out that such acts would betray our values... Yet, we continue living according to economic practices and policies that effectively albeit indirectly, follow these unacknowledged commands."

We live in an economic system where we can be withholding love from our neighbors just out of ignorance of how garment workers are being underpaid and treated without dignity. That is intentionally set up to be out of our sight. Take a breath. I'm not trying to overwhelm you with doom and gloom. I'm just trying to make the point that to choose to love neighbor is an upstream swim. The current is not flowing in that direction. And so it takes resolve and intentionality to love our neighbors, which are both things God's love demonstrates toward us first.

The danger to warn against in our over-connected era is that without intentionality "everybody is my neighbor" can easily turn into no one is my neighbor.

To love with this kind of neighborly love that comes from God intentionally is key. We first have to see how we interconnect with so many neighbors. We have to go against the grain of our

natural inclination and intentionally choose to love them instead of just ourselves. This looks like choosing to learn about injustices built into systems and then build structures to protect the repeatedly oppressed.

To offer neighborly love will look like adopting a prepared posture to share our resources and share our time. In order to live generously, we must reject a scarcity mindset that lets fear decide where our resources go, and adopt a mindset of trust in a God who is caring and generous. To love our neighbor is to expect to give of our time and money. It is choosing to live a life of radical simplicity for the sake of radical generosity. This is a tall order. And I would assume you're not starting from ground zero. There are people that you love in your day-to-day life already. And you probably have more experience and do it better than me. And if you are starting at ground zero, welcome to the journey. We are glad you are here.

We come back around to this familiar story to remind ourselves that love of God and love of neighbor is still what we are walking towards. It going to keep requiring transformation and power from the Holy Spirit. It will continue to require humility, perseverance, grace, and dedication to keep walking toward that end goal. It is our heritage. It is our way of life that on the road we are traveling on to God we love those that we meet on the way.

Neighborly love, all of it— getting know our actual neighbors and having them over for dinner and throwing block parties, fostering children, singing happy birthday, opening hospitality houses for asylum seekers, crying with your friend in grief, sharing a granola bar with the man on the street corner, learning more about where your clothes come from, writing policy to protect workers, standing in solidarity for the oppressed, stopping to clean and bandaging wounds— all neighborly love is the kingdom breaking in the here and now and it is our way. Let us continue to grow and walk in it. Perhaps, we would do good to not assume who are and whom we aren't going to meet along the way.