

SERMON CCI Luke 10: 25- 37 Who Wouldn't Love a Good Samaritan?

We live in a nation with Good Samaritan laws that encourage us to stop and help someone who is injured, say in a car accident. The Good Samaritan laws protect us against lawsuits that could be brought against us after we help. Without Good Samaritan laws, few people would dare to stop and help. I was a good Samaritan once on my way to work at Judson Park on a chilly Sunday morning. As I pulled up to a stop sign in downtown Kent, an elderly man with no jacket or shoes was in a wheelchair having trouble crossing the uphill street. So I put my car in Park, got out and pushed him across the street while impatient drivers sat honking. He thanked me and I went on my way. But what if he had toppled over and hit his head while I pushed him or caught his bare foot under a wheel? Without the Good Samaritan law, I could have been sued. Instead, I was a good Samaritan. In America, we consider every Samaritan a good Samaritan. But at the time Jesus and the lawyer had their conversation in today's scripture reading, in Jewish eyes, there was no such thing as a "good" Samaritan.

An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus: "Teacher, what do I need to do to inherit eternal life?" It was a question wondered about by many people then and today. Like a good teacher, Jesus answered with another question: "What is written in the Law?" The expert knew in theory that the foundation of all laws could be traced to the Ten Commandments. So he quoted the summary of the Law like we did in our Call to Worship. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." It was an excellent legal answer. So Jesus said, "You already know the answer. Just do it."

But, like a good lawyer, the man asked Jesus to define his terms. "Who is my neighbor?" It was a question that had been debated for centuries. Who is my neighbor- is it just fellow Jews, just Jews and Gentiles who follow the Jewish laws, who does God require me to love? Fredrick Buechner imagined the lawyer was asking for something legal like, *"A neighbor (hereinafter referred to as the party of the first part) is to be construed as meaning a person of Jewish descent whose legal residence is within a radius of no more than three statute miles from one's own legal residence unless there is another person of Jewish descent (hereinafter to be referred to as the party of the second part) living closer to the party of the first part than one is oneself, in which case the party of the second part is to be construed as neighbor to the party of the first part and one is oneself relieved of all responsibility of any sort or kind whatsoever."* Don't we love legalese? But here's a very clear

definition of who the lawyer needed to love, and perhaps, more importantly, who he didn't need to love.

"Who is my neighbor?" This is a central question in the church and one that is critical in the life of our nation. Who are we responsible to care for? It is a question that probes all the talk about immigration laws and how we treat people coming across our southern border. It is a question related to how we treat each other from the corporate executive to the homeless person. "Who is my neighbor?" raises questions about race, color of skin, religion, financial status, immigration status, and sexual preference. "Who is my neighbor?" touches every aspect of our lives.

In answer, Jesus gives us the parable we call the parable of the Good Samaritan. A man was traveling down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was mugged by robbers and left for dead beside the road. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was downhill and was notoriously dangerous because thieves often attacked travelers on this road. Two people who could have helped the man, a priest and a Levite, both religious leaders, soon came down the road. Each of them saw the man, but crossed over to the other side of the road and kept going. Jesus does not say why they did not help- did each man have somewhere important to be? Since they were leaving Jerusalem, their appointed time at the temple was over. Or were they afraid of contaminating themselves by touching a dead body? Perhaps the reason did not matter to Jesus. The plain fact is, neither man stopped to help.

But along came a third man, a Samaritan. Now Jesus was, of course, Jewish, and the lawyer and the rest of those listening to this parable were also Jewish. Even the characters in the parable were Jewish-the priest, the Levite, almost surely the wounded man, maybe even the robbers. But then came the Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans had a bitter history of racial and religious conflict. They avoided each other as much as possible. In fact, not only would the injured Jewish man not expect any help from a Samaritan, he probably wouldn't have wanted help from a Samaritan. But the Samaritan not only saw the wounded man, he came near to him, had compassion on him, and took care of him. In our day of cell phones to call 9-1-1 and quick-responding emergency personnel, who among us would have given as much time and money for a total stranger as this Samaritan did? People today are more likely to stand around taking videos with their smart phones than to help. But the Samaritan had compassion and met his adversary's need.

Then it was time for Jesus to flip the conversation to a more important question: He didn't ask "Who does the parable say is your neighbor?" That was the lawyer's question. Jesus asked **who was** the neighbor? Because the point of loving your neighbor as yourself is not about who your neighbor is; the point is about what kind of people **we are**. **Are we** a neighbor or not? Do we love like a neighbor or not? There was only one answer, but the lawyer could not make himself say, "The Samaritan," so he said "The one who showed mercy." And Jesus told him that if he wanted to experience real life, go be like the hated Samaritan who loved like a neighbor.

Jesus' question is the same for each of us. Do we love our neighbor as ourselves? Do we have a neighbor's heart? Because how to love our neighbors as ourselves is a question of the heart. It's not a matter of who is my neighbor or who isn't my neighbor. The person with this view of faith can always find a reason, a rule, a law that allows them to exclude someone from their caring. Maybe it's who we shouldn't have to sell wedding cakes or flowers to, or who is crossing our southern border illegally or inconveniently, or who doesn't deserve to have a safe place to sleep at night, or who believes the wrong religion, or someone whose skin is brown and doesn't speak our language. Loving neighbors as ourselves often requires us to act beyond safe boundaries and rules to meet their needs with God's authentic love.

Loving our neighbors requires us to see all people as neighbors. I watched a YouTube video recently of a passionate Christian young man who decided to give McDonalds hamburgers and French fries to the homeless in his city. So he handed out hamburger and fries after hamburger and fries until one homeless man asked if he would sit with him and just talk for awhile. The young man hesitated. After all, the man was homeless, what could they possibly have in common to talk about? But then he sat down on the sidewalk and began to listen and talk and really see the man- not see a hungry homeless guy, not see a burden on city resources, not see a failure, but see a person created in God's image just like himself. Sitting on that sidewalk gave him the heart to **be a neighbor**, not just someone successful or nice enough to give food away.

This parable has more than enough for each of us to explore in our personal lives- how we are called to **be neighbors** to those in need regardless of their lifestyle, religious beliefs or nonbeliefs, sexual orientation, financial status, language they speak, nationality or color of their skin, their criminal history, or any other category we can put forward to avoid being their neighbor. Do we have the

compassion of the Samaritan to be neighbor to people who are not like us, even when it makes us uncomfortable to do so? People who may even hate us? Or do we try to avoid people who make us uncomfortable? That's a big question for each of us. Because, if we're honest, we all have groups of people we prefer to walk past.

But I invite us to also raise our eyes to the bigger picture at this time in our nation. When there are people in need coming to our borders, when there are mass shootings of people based on their skin color or religion or sexual preference, how do we as followers of Christ respond as neighbor? Are thoughts and prayers after the repeating tragedies enough? Yes, there are issues of how many immigrants we can absorb, illegal crossings versus legal crossings, and the resources needed to process people in our immigration system. Yes, there are issues about gun laws, mental illness, and most recently, beliefs in white supremacy in our mass shootings. All of these issues are real. And we can become weary because these situations come at us so fast and so often. And the truth is they are complex. But... like in Jesus' parable, with its wounded and robbed man lying by the side of the road, we have wounded, weary, and scared people at our border and people in our cities who lie wounded or slaughtered. Will we **be** their neighbor?

The Samaritan did not merely stand by and pray; he acted in compassion. Will we? We may not be there on the scene to help victims personally like the Samaritan did, praise God for the Good Samaritans and first responders who help after shootings and border control officers who act with compassion. But we can take a Samaritan stand and call our nation's leaders to solutions that treat people as neighbors rather than criminals, and to do what is needed to stop the mass killings in our cities and the inhumane treatment of immigrant children and families. Complexity does not relive us of Jesus' call to love our neighbors with actions, not merely thoughts and prayers. Unless our thoughts and prayers are asking for the courage and heart to be real neighbors.

Jesus' words, "Go and do likewise," are our marching orders. Will we?