

“Who Is My Neighbor?”
Luke 10:25-37
Rev. Liz Kearny
Longview Presbyterian Church
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Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ He answered, ‘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 neighbour as yourself.’ And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’ Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the

hands of the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’ This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

“Who is my neighbor?” We can’t know for sure the lawyer’s real intention in asking this question. The text says he wanted to justify himself. Maybe he wants to win this argument he’s having, a feeling I’m sure none of us can relate to. But I think it is fair to say that if someone is asking who their neighbor *is*, perhaps they are trying to figure out also who their neighbor is *not*, or, said another way, they are trying to find out who they are allowed to leave off their “neighbor list”.

Have you ever found yourself wondering who you can leave off your “neighbor list”? I know this faith community well, and I know how hard we work to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. But some neighbors are more difficult to love than others, am I right? There are some neighbors with whom we have fundamental and important political and theological disagreements. I wonder if there are folks we might dart into the next aisle in the grocery store to avoid because we know a conversation with them will just make us angry. I can imagine there are folks who come on the news or show up in the paper who bring up less than Christian feelings inside our hearts. Whoever you are picturing in your head right now is likely the person Jesus meant for you to call to mind when he brought the Samaritan into the story.

Jews and Samaritans had more going on than general dislike for each other. They were not just folks of different backgrounds. They had a history of violent conflict. About 200

years before this, the Jews had destroyed the Samaritan temple because of what the Samaritans believed about true worship of God. And just a chapter before our passage this morning, a Samaritan village had refused to receive Jesus as a guest and Jesus' own disciples had suggested that they command fire to come down from heaven and consume that Samaritan village (Luke 9:54). The Samaritan in this parable is a good stand-in for that person or group of people who bring resentment and possibly even righteous anger up in you as you consider what they believe and what you believe, as you consider your own history of conflict with them.

I know I said we can't know what the Jewish lawyer was thinking when he asked "And who is my neighbor?" But I feel like I've been where he was when he asked that question. I know in my head that God's love is abundant and generous and slow to anger and full of steadfastness, and I am happy to let that love flow when I think about those in need of care, the poor, downtrodden, the oppressed. But when Jesus invokes the person, the people, who I will do anything to avoid, the people I'd like to scream at because I find their theology and their politics to be hateful and violent, then all of a sudden, I realize I have found the limit of where I think God's love can abide.

And so for this Jewish lawyer, for me, for any of us who have not yet admitted who we'd rather leave off our "neighbor list," Jesus doesn't let us focus on all those folks we would naturally pity and want to shower with compassion. That would be too safe. Instead, Jesus invites *us* to feel what it would be like to be that vulnerable person on the side of the road. And Jesus makes the only person to stop and offer help the same person we would

prefer to scream at in rage. Because maybe we cannot see the extent to which we have put limits on God's love until we can name the person in whom we have ceased to see in the image of God. Perhaps best way to reveal who we have left off our "neighbor list" is to finally admit who we would be scandalized to see embodying the love of God towards us.

There's a verb used in this passage that is only used two other times in the whole gospel of Luke. It's the Greek word for the Samaritan being "moved with pity," the verb *splagchnizomai*. The only other places this verb is used are earlier in the gospel when Jesus is "moved with pity" because a mother brings her dead son to be healed and later in the gospel when God is portrayed as a father who is "moved with pity" when his prodigal son finally comes home. So, Jesus, God's Son, is moved with pity. *Your worst enemy* in this parable is moved with pity. And later, God the Father of the prodigal son is moved with pity. Luke doesn't leave us much choice with his language here. Jesus insists: God's love is so boundless and free that it can show up anywhere, even in the face and actions of the one we call enemy.

I want you to close your eyes, if you feel comfortable, and imagine something with me. Imagine that you are headed home after church today, going along your usual route. You narrowly avoiding an animal that darted into the road and your vehicle rolls over and you are thrown into a ditch on the side of the road. You are badly injured and so overwhelmed by the pain that it is difficult for you to even cry out for help. You manage to turn your head to look up the road and you see a friend of yours from church driving towards you. You make eye contact with them and your body relaxes a bit, even in the sharp pain, since you know this means

you are going to get some help. But their car doesn't slow down. In fact, your friend makes an anxious face and mouths "I'm sorry" as they drive right past you and your flipped vehicle. There are no words for the shock and confusion you feel. But just then, you hear the hum of another engine coming down the road and you turn your head again, gingerly now as the throbbing pain is worsening. You recognize this vehicle too - it's your neighbor's car! Hope catches in your throat, but then sinks the moment you realize, in horror, that they have glanced at you and then awkwardly pretended not to see you, focusing their vision on the road in front of them. As you watch their car disappear, you have now entered into a full panic. These two folks you were sure you could count on to help you have completely passed you by in one of the worst moments of your whole life.

Just then, you hear the sound of tires crunching to a slow-down on the shoulder of the road in front of you. In your disorientation, you hadn't even noticed the car that had come from behind you, but now you see it. You notice first that it is the kind of car you wouldn't be caught dead driving. Your heart sinks when you see the back bumper, which is plastered with stickers in support of that political candidate you just spent most of coffee hour at church lamenting to your friends. There's a parking sticker on the back window for that church in town you have come to deeply resent for their theological views on important issues of your faith. The door to the vehicle opens and a person almost slips on the gravel shoulder as they rush to your side, a look of deep concern and alertness on their face. They already have out their cell phone, dialing 911. Through the throbbing of your head and the faint ringing of their phone's outgoing call, you hear them

say to you, “My name is Sam. I saw your car flipped over on my way home from church and I’m here to help however I possibly can. I’m calling 911 now, so just stay still. I’ll grab a blanket from my car, as I’m sure your body is entering into shock. Don’t worry - I’ll stay with you. I’ll get you to get you to safety.”

Take a deep breath in as you return to the sanctuary, exhale as you open your eyes.

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to you when you were at your most vulnerable? I wonder if it was the one who showed you mercy. Jesus does not promise the lawyer, nor us, that our enemies in real life will actually love us this way. Jesus is not calling us to agree with our enemies, to stop advocating for God’s justice, or to lay aside our call to stand with the marginalized. That’s not the point here. The point is that if we can name the person who we would be scandalized to receive mercy from, then we have finally found the edge of where we believe God’s grace can abide. And if Jesus can imagine bringing us God’s mercy through the one who is past the limits of our own love, can we open our hearts to allow God to bring mercy through us to that Samaritan?

It’s not a mistake that this whole story takes place on the same road Jesus will travel as he sets his face to the cross, that place where Jesus looks at us, those who have become enemies of God, and says, “Even though you kill me, I will love you with an everlasting love.” For that is the only kind of love and mercy, the kind that embraces enemies, that can actually end our cycle of violence and start something new. Jesus’ invitation still stands for us today: To the one who is past the limits of our own mercy, will we go and do likewise? Amen.