

Who Is My Neighbor? Luke 10:23-37

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

An argument erupted between two best friends. It got louder and louder, the name-calling got uglier, and soon both went their separate ways. It has been about 5 years, and they still don't talk to one another. In fact, if either one sees the other in public, they will go to great lengths to avoid any contact. Friends of both try to bring them together, try to get them to reconcile, but to no avail. If they're both invited to a party, they'll stay at opposite sides of the room, or one will sometimes leave altogether. Neither is really sure what the argument was exactly about, but neither is willing to forgive the other for the words that were said – and time continues to roll on. Both claimed to be God-fearing Christians. *But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*

The guy next door is an idiot – always has been. I know him from work and he is just the thickest, takes him forever to get the simplest jobs done. Nobody can work with him and the boss understands why – you cannot stand near the man, his shower must be broken or he's allergic to water – so he gets solo tasks from the boss. He doesn't keep his yard clean, there's always some sort of junk sitting outside cluttering stuff up. Two of the four cars in the yard don't run. His wife is sick and he needs help, but I'm not going over there to offer my assistance. But I will be in church on Sunday morning. *But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*

The couple has been married 34 years, and now the children are out of the house, some with their own families. They agreed they don't have to continue the charade anymore, they separated and are biding their time till they can get their divorce. It's been ugly! Enemies treat each other better across no man's land in all out war. The animosity they have toward each other is palpable, their friends know it and dread having them in the same place, uncomfortable to have either around. But he'll be at the 8:00 service and she'll be at the 10:00. *But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*

Did you listen to the exchange between the lawyer and Jesus in our text? It is the lawyer who asks Him, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asks him what is written in the law, and the lawyer does a good job of summarizing both the 1st and 2nd tables of the law. Jesus responds to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."

By the answer the man gives, we know that he believes he has kept commandments one through three, for he ignores the first table of the law with his question, "*And who is my neighbor?*" It is as if he were asking Jesus, "*I love God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength, but which neighbors must I love as myself.*"

Does that sound familiar? How many of our neighbors do we have problems with? Which old friends are we afraid of seeing in public? Which neighbors do we avoid? Who do we pray never calls us again for help and assistance? Whose pain and suffering makes us chuckle? Which idiot

do we love to watch make a fool of himself? Basically, desiring to justify ourselves, we ask Jesus, "*And who is my neighbor?*"

We know the folks affected by hurricane Harvey are our neighbors, we are only too glad to do what we can to help them. We pray for them, and somehow find a way to send some money to help them.

We know our neighbors in Montana are struggling with the fires that are raging out of control, we are only too glad to do what we can to help them. We pray for them, and somehow find a way to send some money to help them.

We know that those in the path of hurricane Irma are our neighbors, we are only too glad to do what we can to help them. We pray for them, and somehow find a way to send some money to help them.

Why is it that our neighbors who happen to live in our own house, in our neighborhoods, and work with us are harder to love? Is it because we are too close to them? Did you listen to the Old Testament lesson? Did you see what the Samaritans did to the people of Judah and Jerusalem, and how they treated other who were also descendants of Jacob? Jews and Samaritans hated one another from that day onward, and treated each other poorly. There are certain prejudices we have, the cloud our hearts and minds, they also ruin the love that we are to have toward our neighbor.

What the Samaritans did to the Jesus is why Jesus uses a Jew and a Samaritan in our Gospel. In light of that, maybe it helps you better understand Jesus' response to the lawyer, the story of the Good Samaritan. There was no love lost between them. For a Samaritan to help a Jew, or vice versa, was unheard of – it did not happen.

Dear friends, we do not love all our neighbors as ourselves – for shame! Repent! To top it off, we try to justify ourselves, giving what we believe are good reasons for why we do not love certain neighbors. Repent!

Jesus is the Good Samaritan. Christ Himself gives of Himself, all that He is and has, to heal and care for sinners. He even provides for their further care by providing His church with the means to care for sinners in their convalescence.

How was Jesus treated in His life? Some mocked him, scorning Him, always questioning Him and looking for ways to trip Him up and make Him look bad. Even his own family thought He was crazy for some of the things He was saying and doing.

Jesus talked and spoke of forgiveness and love, but always with the understanding, "Go and sin no more." It was not the keeping of the law which would save people. Jesus showed the people time and again how they failed to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength – and that they certainly did not love their neighbor as themselves. Don't trust in yourselves was the message.

Ultimately, they hated Him so much that they found an excuse to have Him put to death. After the soldiers nailed Him to the cross and the Jewish leaders stood there mocking Him and taunting Him as He hung there to die, what was the first thing He said from the cross? “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

The two other malefactors were returning the curses and the taunts of the crowd, but Jesus begged for their forgiveness – asking the Father for mercy, and not to hold their sins against them.

You and I live in disobedience to the will of God, all we need to do is be honest about who our neighbors are – all of them – and it is evident that we do not love them as we love ourselves. And in recognition of that fact, it is true that we do not obey God, meaning we do not love Him with all our whole heart, mind, strength, and soul, or we would be obedient to His Word.

But God in His infinite goodness and love has had mercy on us. God’s love for us came down in human flesh to have mercy on us.

Christ found us stripped, beaten, and dying. We are the robbers who have destroyed our own lives with broken relationships by our own fault. Let us be honest and not blame others for our role in every sabotaged relationship. We were willing saboteurs in each instance – whether we were unwilling to relent, or unwilling to forgive, or simply selfishly wanting our own way.

I could tell you to show mercy. Indeed, in our text, Christ gives exactly those instructions.

But Jesus told the story to show the helplessness of relying upon yourself to obtain the inheritance of eternal life. You can see it clearly, for the harder you try, the more you realize your failures. He did this so that you might come to God not in braggadocio, but with meekness, with a repentant and humble heart – and there be blessed by His mercy.

With His own flesh, Christ restores us to a right relationship with God. His forgiveness covers our unwillingness to forgive. With His own flesh, He repairs the gap that has come between God and us by our own unloving nature. His blood He pours out to be the wine of healing that closes the wounds inflicted by even our bloodless conflicts with our neighbors.

Christ is the Good Samaritan who shows mercy to us. He is our good neighbor who is there to refresh and renew us with His healing – in our ears and in our mouths, He gives to you the rich bounty of His mercy – the forgiveness of sins. And it is in His mercy to us that we inherit eternal life. Amen.