### “Which Was a Neighbor?” Steve Finlan for The First Church, July 10, 2022

**Luke 10:25–37**

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” 27He 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 neighbor as yourself.” 28And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

30Jesus 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. 31Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34He 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. 35The 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.’ 36Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” 37He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Sometimes we find ourselves asking questions, honest questions, when we are seeking guidance or are trying to make a decision. Sometimes, though, we ask these questions when we may already know the answer but we need to hear ourselves—or somebody else—say it out loud. This, then, confirms what we already knew. Was the lawyer trying to test Jesus or was he asking honestly, to confirm what he already understood? We don’t know.

It is very interesting that the lawyer, when asked what the law commands, gave the dual love commandment, and not the Ten Commandments or any of the summarizing commands in Deuteronomy as an answer. He seems to have moved from the many laws of the Torah to the law of Love. We don’t know whether this lawyer heard this love summary from Jesus or from some rabbi. The Rabbi Hillel the Elder, who died when Jesus as a teenager, was known to have given half of that love commandment to his pupils as his summary of the Law: “Love your neighbor as yourself. That which is hateful unto you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole of the Torah; the rest is commentary.” It appears Hillel had a good sense of humor. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillel_the_Elder#:~:text=He%20quoted%20from%20Leviticus%2C%20saying,Torah%3B%20the%20rest%20is%20commentary>.) But Jesus’ own summary also included the command to love God with all one’s heart and soul and mind (Matt 22:37–39). The lawyer quotes both parts of the love command, and Jesus calls it the right answer (Luke 10:28). I’m guessing that the lawyer already knew Jesus’ dual commandment from having listened to Jesus, and was repeating it. But the lawyer still wants to quibble, apparently, as seen in his question “But who is my neighbor?” The lawyer may not be wholly honest, but be quibbling or testing Jesus. Nevertheless, Jesus answers honestly and with majesty of heart.

Jesus utters this great parable about doing good. There is a dual point to the parable, not only that true neighborliness means offering care to a needy neighbor, but also that a Samaritan was fully capable of being a true neighbor. The Samaritan acted like a true neighbor, when a priest and a Levite did not. Thus it was a lesson against ethnic prejudice, and also against pride of status.

Jesus picked the label that was most offensive to his Jewish audience; what would he pick if *we* were the audience? Would he tell a story about a good Arab, or a good Mexican, a good black person, a good homeless person, or a good lesbian? It’s clear that Jesus worked against prejudice, even against the prejudices of the supposedly most righteous people in society. He talked to women and Gentiles, Syro-Phoenicians and Romans, and he healed them.

We, too, should be open to all racial groups and ethnicities, and be ready to do them good. We should offer spiritual hospitality to whoever comes our way, not favoring one group or gender. Even a priest or another religious servant might not do the caring thing, but an ordinary foreigner might. Picture yourself in this position and be honest; how would you act?

Whom we encounter in life seems largely a matter of chance, but we should treat each encounter as a sacred opportunity. We don’t know if God intended for us to meet certain people, but we can treat each meeting as blessed and approved by God. Every encounter is meaningful. It only waits for *us* to add value to enliven that meaning.

Have you ever had an encounter where it seemed it must have been God’s doing? The encounter was either just what you needed or it was just what the other person needed. Let’s call them blessed encounters. We don’t know whether God arranged for us to meet that other person, but it *feels* like that. Certainly a victim of robbers must feel that God had sent their rescuer. Whenever anyone experiences a devastating attack, they are spiritually wounded. Their sense of safety and of connection to other people is damaged. In the case of sexual assault, the victim may feel intense shame and be inclined toward self-blame.

One kind of Good Samaritan is the rape counselor. Rape counselors regularly have to assure the victim that they are not to blame. One of these Good Samaritans is Julia Phillips, and she says that in almost every case she has to reassure the victim that she is not to blame. She refrains from giving advice, but puts the emphasis on being a compassionate listener. “Don’t insert your own life into other people’s traumas,” she writes (<https://www.bustle.com/articles/123431-9-lessons-ive-learned-as-a-rape-crisis-counselor-that-are-applicable-to-everyday-life>). Julia doesn’t share her own story, but listens to the victim’s story. Just “showing up [is] 90% of the advocate’s role.” Your *presence* is 90%!

Another Good Samaritan is someone who found a lost wallet at the World Games going on in Birmingham, AL right now. The Good Samaritan took the wallet to an address she found in the wallet. It was actually a neighbor’s address. The neighbor contacted the owner and handed it over. There were really two Good Samaritans in that story! (https://www.al.com/news/birmingham/2022/07/angels-walking-amongst-us-birmingham-woman-trying-to-find-good-samaritan-who-returned-wallet-lost-at-world-games.html)

My wife Karen had a Good Samaritan help her. It was when she was heavily pregnant. She came out of a store and saw that her car had a flat tire. She stood there in shock, when a man in a business suit came up and said he could change her tire for her. He said, “I know what you’re going through. My wife just went through a pregnancy.” It was a kind act by a stranger.

The Good Samaritan has become an icon in the western imagination. We use the term for any time someone intervenes on behalf of a victim in an ongoing crime or disaster, which can sometimes be dangerous for the Good Samaritan; sometimes they manage to save someone, *and* themselves. Let’s keep this image alive in our imaginations, for we may be called on to be the Good Samaritan sometimes.

This parable puts a big emphasis on ethics. The Samaritan is good not because of his religion, but because of his kindly deeds, without any thought of reward. In fact, the two religious authorities in the story are the ones who pass by without helping.

Perhaps you may not find yourself in an extreme situation, but your effort to help in even the *smallest* of cases can make a *big* difference. Go and do likewise.