### “The One Who Showed Mercy” Steve Finlan for The First Church, July 13, 2025

**Amos 7:7–10**

7 This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. 8 And the Lord said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said, “See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will spare them no longer . . .”

10 Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words.”

**Luke 10:25, 29–37**

25 An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said . . . 29 “who is my neighbor?” 30 Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he gave two denarii to the innkeeper and said, ‘Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” 37 He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Jesus’ famous parable is triggered by a lawyer’s question, “who is my neighbor?” It tells a shocking story, shocking to Jewish ears, that has a Samaritan being the true neighbor, when a priest and a Levite were not. Among Jews, the Gentiles had the reputation of being sinful, chaotic, and lawless. The Jews also had contempt for Samaritans, whom they considered to be half-breeds. The Samaritans were descendants of a blending of the northern tribes of Israel with eastern peoples who had been imported by the Assyrians seven centuries earlier. The Assyrians used deportations as a way of breaking up strongly nationalistic groups.

After facing rebellions in both their eastern and western provinces, the Assyrians decided to deport some eastern Arameans to northern Israel, while deporting some Israelites to eastern regions. The peoples in the Samarian region intermarried over time, so the Samaritans were, roughly speaking, half-Israelite. They had retained the worship of Yahweh, and even today scholars study the Samaritan Pentateuch, their version of the first five books of the Bible. But their Yahweh-worship was not good enough, in the eyes of the Jews. For one thing, they did not make pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but worshipped in their own temple on Mount Gerizim. The Jews considered the Samaritan worship a distortion, and a sinful departure from the commandment to worship in Jerusalem.

Patriotism can embody heroic and selfless virtues, but it can also acquire bigotry and hatred of outsiders. Jesus offended Jewish patriotism on more than one occasion. I can imagine the shock that must have thundered through his apostles’ minds when they heard him remark, about a Roman soldier, “Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith” (Matt 8:10 NIV), and to continue by saying “many will come from east and west and will take their places at the banquet with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness” (8:11–12 NRSV), thus foretelling the inclusion in the kingdom of faithful Gentiles, and the exclusion of Jews who lacked faith.

Thus, the parable of the Good Samaritan is not only a lesson on loving kindness, but also a lesson against ethnic prejudice and pride of status. Jesus picked the nationality, Samaritan, that would be most offensive to his Jewish audience. The respected religious authorities, priests and Levites, are represented in the story by characters who show no compassion, who are not neighborly at all.

The parable is so compelling, even the lawyer is forced to admit that the true neighbor was “the one who showed him mercy” (Luke 10:37). Thus, neighborliness has nothing to do with nation, race, or social status, but only with merciful deeds. It is a radical notion, which forces people to admit that people of all nations can be merciful, can be true neighbors, while prestigious priests and religious officials might be heartless and unneighborly.

Here, not long after the Fourth of July, we Americans have to admit this, too. Patriotism can indeed embody noble and heroic characteristics, but it can also include unsavory bigotries and hard-heartedness, and set up a rigid barrier between “us” and “them.” If Jesus asked the Jews to contemplate a Good Samaritan, he may ask us to contemplate a Good Arab or a Good Hindu.

I have a story of some Good Samaritans who helped me. Karen and I were in her Prius, driving up the steep road that led to the side road where I lived in the Bronx. But the road was icy and we couldn’t get any traction, even when I tried pushing from behind. Suddenly a car drove up, stopped, and four or five Middle-Eastern looking guys got out. They immediately joined me at the back of the car, and with all of us pushing and Karen applying a little gas, we got it to a less icy spot and she was able to get traction. The guys waved, I said thanks, and they piled in their car and drove off. Just a bit of ordinary New York inter-racial kindness. We were very grateful, but it was all over in a minute.

Goodness and kindness are *expected*, as God showed Amos by holding up a plumb line, a weighted line that will hang down perfectly straightly, to symbolize the straightforward goodness that was expected of those who were members of the covenant community. Unfortunately, Israel’s chief priest at the time felt threatened by this honest prophet, and asked the king to kick him out of the country. Centuries later, the chief priest of Jerusalem could not tolerate the words of the prophet Jesus, and would get the Romans to kill him.

So the lessons for us are fairly obvious. Be a good neighbor, serve others, and don’t be prejudiced against foreigners. Recognize that they might be the neighborly and spiritual ones. There’s also a lesson that high-status figures can turn out to be bigots, and even to plot violence.

The lesson for us, of course, is to avoid pride of status, race, or nation, but to practice mercy. Let us be straight and narrow like a plumb line, kind like a Good Samaritan.