

Being a Neighbor Means Not Passing By

The Parable of The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37 Leviticus 19:1-4, 13-18
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Who do you consider to be your neighbors? The question, "**Who is my neighbor?**" was asked in today's Gospel lesson by a lawyer, who more accurately should be described as a religious scholar in the Law of Moses. Jesus answers him with the very familiar parable of the Good Samaritan.

If you're like most people, you probably think that the answer to that question is that *everyone* is our neighbor. But when you look closely at this parable, you'll notice that Jesus never really answered this question directly. Instead, Jesus gives an example of how three different people respond to someone in distress and then asks a question of his own, "Which of these three acted like a neighbor?"

Instead of answering the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answers the unasked question, "What is a neighbor?" And the answer: a neighbor is someone who doesn't pass by on the other side; a neighbor is a person who is kind, compassionate, and merciful to others.

In this instance then, Jesus' isn't so worried whether we consider *other* people to be our neighbor, as **he is concerned that we act neighborly to all the people that we encounter in life.** This is another way to flesh out what it means to live by the Golden Rule.

The difference may sound subtle, but it's very important. For instance, I may live right next door to some folks, but if I don't treat them in a neighborly way, then at one level I'm really not their neighbor.

The priest and the Levite in this parable, by passing by on the other side of the road in order to avoid the man who was hurt, or possibly even dead, were not acting as a neighbor to the man in need – even though, in that culture, they had good excuses for why they didn't stop to help (i.e. they would have become 'unclean').

Here's the twist that some folks may not be aware. **In Jesus' parable the Samaritan represents a racial and social class of people who the Jews considered to be unclean, socially outcast, and even religious heretics.** Yet, it is this reviled person, not fellow Jews, who acted like a neighbor by showing mercy – mercy to the injured person who would have despised him, no less.

This was a very shocking story to its first Jewish audiences, as all of Jesus' parables were. **They would have expected the Samaritan to be the bad guy in the story. Instead, their well-defined (and narrow) categories of who are and who are not the people of God were shattered.** It's another great example of the inclusiveness of God. When

applied to our own day and time, we find that it's still a shocking revelation about the character of God, and about how we should treat others as fellow family members in the kingdom of God.

Historically, a Jew would never expect a Samaritan, who lived in the region just north of the land of Judah, to act like a neighbor - primarily because they never felt obligated to act like a neighbor to Samaritans. In fact, there were laws that prohibited Jews from even interacting with Samaritans.

But what about the Old Testament law that commanded that they 'love their neighbor'? As we read in the book of Leviticus, **the original command to 'love your neighbor' comes with a loophole**, for it specifies and limits one's neighbor to "your kin" and "any of your people." Legalistically then, Jews considered only other Jews to be their neighbors. Therefore, when the lawyer asked Jesus his question, he was looking for an additional loophole even in this already narrow definition of neighbor. To his surprise, **Jesus removes all the loopholes that could be used to restrict who should be considered a neighbor.**

By offering compassion, the Samaritan provides a remarkable example of loving action which is without preference or partiality or prejudice. And as remarkable, he set the example of helping a person in need without expecting anything in return. Haven't we somehow been taught to expect *something* from those we help? At the very least a "Thank you."

At a surface level interpretation of today's text, we are each faced with the question: **Have you or I ever crossed to the other side in order to avoid someone in need?** What is our responsibility and obligation as a Christian?

This parable acts on a deeper, metaphorical level as well. It also calls us to ask of ourselves: **Who are the people that you and I consider to be on the 'other side' from where we are?** This would include people who are different from you and I theologically, politically, socially, economically, intellectually, physically, emotionally, racially, sexually, and on and on. **What would it take for you and me to be a neighbor to them?**

Again, in this parable, being a neighbor is specifically expressed through an act of mercy. It reveals that mercy is much more than just a *feeling* of pity and sympathy for someone. Genuine mercy takes the form of *action* that expresses genuine concern for the welfare and well-being of another. **Mercy is a desire to actually do something to help alleviate the pain and distress of that person**, regardless of what or who they are.

One of the hardest parts about being a follower of Christ, at least for me and perhaps for you, isn't whether we are *able* to show mercy to others, or even *if* we show mercy, but rather whether we are impartial to *whom* we demonstrate that mercy. **Why is it that we show compassion, sympathy, and kindness to some people but not to everyone?**

The parable reveals, using the example of the Jewish priest and the Levite, that **there is no excuse for passing by on the other side when someone is in need.** And note that after describing the merciful example set by the Samaritan, Jesus commands the lawyer, and us as well, to "Go, and do likewise!"

And here's a little Bible thumping for you. Listen to this warning from the Book of James, Chapter 2.

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you show partiality, you commit

sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors... For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. (James 2:8-9,13)

That's what being inclusive is really all about – it's about being impartial! But let's be honest, being neighborly to others often involves risk, emotional energy, the sacrificing of time, sometimes money, the setting aside of one's own personal agenda, and the courage to overcome those numerous barriers between ourselves and others.

Not passing by on the other side almost always infringes on our zone of comfort. What becomes evident is the undeniable fact that it's hard for most of us to come face to face with our own fears and prejudices toward others. And we all have them. **Most often, it is our fears and prejudices that lead us to pick and choose whom we will act like a neighbor.** The great German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, once wrote:

Neighborliness is not a quality in *other* people, it is simply their claim on *ourselves*. We have literally no time to sit down and ask ourselves whether so-and-so is our neighbor or not. We must get into action and obey; we must behave like a neighbor to that person.

On the streets and sidewalks, the school hallways and the office corridors of life, we constantly run into wounded people, many whom find their personal lives in a ditch. There is a world crying out for mercy at our very doors, literally. If we are alert and sensitive we will realize that **every single day we are in contact with people who are lonely, depressed, hurting, hungry for love and attention and acceptance, crushed by disappointment and failure, guilt-ridden and wounded by sin.**

And from time to time in your life **you may find that you yourself are that wounded person in a ditch, just waiting for a Good Samaritan to stop and offer help.** Therefore, during this coming week I'd like for you to **recall the people in your life who have been a neighbor by showing compassion and mercy to you.** Who were they? You may not even know or remember their names. What did they do to help? Most likely it wasn't putting you on their donkey and taking you to the nearest inn. But it was something, perhaps even just a smile. Say a prayer of thanks for them.

And remember that in the parable it was the wounded person's despised enemy, the Samaritan, who was the one who demonstrated love and mercy. So keep your eyes and your mind open. Perhaps it may be someone you consider to be on the "other side" that will be the one to stop and offer you mercy.

Jesus says to each one of us: be like the Samaritan, show mercy. For being a neighbor means not passing by!

Amen.