

In Between Stranger & Neighbor

The Parable of The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Our theme for Lent this year, from A Sanctified Art, is **Everything [in] Between: Meeting God in the Midst of Extremes**. As a way of introduction, the resource material writes the following.

This series is an invitation to navigate the polarities in our lives with more faith, intention, and openness to be transformed. Each weekly sub-theme explores two supposed binaries, like "faith & works" or "rest & growth," or "grief & hope." We often consider these ideas to be opposing. However, as we explore these concepts within the scriptures, we find nuance and complexity. We find that these dichotomies are false. We might begin to see a full spectrum instead of black and white. We might find that God is present in between.

As resource partner, the Rev. Anna Strickland reflects, "**We construct boxes** around 'sacred' and 'secular,' 'woman' and 'man,' 'left' and 'right,' compressing the complexity and beauty of the whole spectrum of being into just two words. What a gift it is to set the boxes aside and follow the example of our Creator who created night and day and everything in between; land and water and everything in between; you and me and everything in between. The Alpha and the Omega is surely with us in the space in between." The fact is, **God is not contained by the categories we create**, or influenced by our dividers and walls.

On this First Sunday in Lent, we find ourselves looking at the familiar **parable of The Good Samaritan and what it means to look in between the polarities of stranger and neighbor**. The question, "**Who is my neighbor?**", which is just another way to ask, "Who's in and who's out?", was asked by a lawyer, who more accurately should be described as a religious scholar in the Law of Moses. Jesus answers him with a parable. If you're like most people, you probably think that the answer to that question is that everyone is our neighbor. But when we look closely, we notice that Jesus never really answers 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, generous, 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 to avoid the man who was hurt, or possibly even dead, were not acting as a neighbor to the man in need. However, in that culture **they had good excuses for why they didn't stop to help** (i.e. they would have become 'unclean'). Resource commentator, the Rev. Jeff Chu, introduces an interesting thought concerning this. He writes:

In his last speech before being assassinated, **the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.** spoke about the story of the Good Samaritan. King had visited the Jericho Road in 1959. He saw its twists and felt its turns as it wound through the hills and sank into a valley outside Jerusalem. Along the way were so many potential hiding places for robbers to lie in wait, ready to ambush weary travelers.

King said, "I'm going to tell you what my imagination tells me" about the priest and the Levite. "It's possible those men were afraid." Perhaps, he suggested, **they fearfully asked themselves, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?"** **The Good Samaritan, King said, "reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"** Then he urged his listeners to imagine themselves on contemporary Jericho Roads. Could they—would they—ask that same question when they saw others struggling? King's speech offered a master class in wrestling with complexity... King's reading rebukes tidy delineations between us and them.

So yes, there is an in between between stranger and neighbor. And here's the twist in the parable 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 kin-dom of God.

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 to avoid someone in need?** What is our responsibility and obligation as a Christian? This parable also 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.

I'll close by putting it into perspective this way. 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.

During this coming week, **recall the people in your life who have been a neighbor by showing you compassion and mercy**. When has a stranger also been a neighbor? And when and how have you lived in between being a stranger and a neighbor?

Amen.

Resource:
Everything [in] Between, A Sanctified Art, 2025.