

July 14, 2019
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Luke 10:25-37 Won't You Be My Neighbor?
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Luke 10:25-37 The Message

Just then a religion scholar stood up with a question to test Jesus. "Teacher, what do I need to do to get eternal life?" He answered, "What's written in God's Law? How do you interpret it?" He said, "That you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence—and that you love your neighbor as well as you do yourself." "Good answer!" said Jesus. "Do it and you'll live." Looking for a loophole, he asked, "And just how would you define 'neighbor'?" Jesus answered by telling a story. "There was once a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. On the way he was attacked by robbers. They took his clothes, beat him up, and went off leaving him half-dead. Luckily, a priest was on his way down the same road, but when he saw him he angled across to the other side. Then a Levite religious man showed up; he also avoided the injured man. "A Samaritan traveling the road came on him. When he saw the man's condition, his heart went out to him. He gave him first aid, disinfecting and bandaging his wounds. Then he lifted him onto his donkey, led him to an inn, and made him comfortable. In the morning he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take good care of him. If it costs any more, put it on my bill—I'll pay you on my way back.' "What do you think? Which of the three became a neighbor to the man attacked by robbers?" "The one who treated him kindly," the religion scholar responded. Jesus said, "Go and do the same."

This story is known as the Good Samaritan, and it is a story that you might already be familiar with. I used the Message translation which is more of a paraphrase so we might hear it in a new way. Another way to hear a familiar story in a fresh way is to ask ourselves who we are in the story as we hear a story through the eyes and viewpoints of different characters. We can be the traveler who gets beaten and robbed, the priest who doesn't help, the religious man who doesn't help, and the Samaritan who does help. Given these choices, most of us want to believe that we would be the Good Samaritan.

We want to see ourselves as the hero. We don't want to believe that we might avoid those who need our help, the way the priest and the religious man do. We don't want to accept that sometimes good people don't do the right thing. We don't want to see the ways we hurt each other, as the robbers do in the story. One person who might be appealing in the story is the innkeeper. He gets to play a part in caring for the person in need without actually taking any risk.

We have been talking for the last few weeks about Mister Rogers Neighborhood. Mister Rogers didn't call us acquaintances or friends. He didn't call us boys or girls or ladies and gentlemen. Mister Rogers called us neighbors, which is biblical language. Jesus is talking with a legal expert who is trying to trap him when asking, who is my neighbor? Jesus answers with a story and when Jesus tells a story, it forces us to question what we think we know about God and ourselves. A man is beaten by thieves and left to die. A priest crosses to the other side of the road when he sees the injured man. Another religious leader does the same. Finally, someone else comes down the road, someone who is the wrong class and the wrong color, someone who is a member of a despised group. This Samaritan is on a journey, but he stops. He is moved with compassion and helps the injured man, takes him to an inn, and pays for his stay and for his care. Which one of these three was a neighbor? The one who treated him kindly.

During the first week of shooting Mister Rogers Neighborhood, Mister Rogers addressed the war in Vietnam with a story of war in "The Neighborhood of Make-Believe." Mister Rogers believed that children and adults need to learn to handle tragedy and grief. Mister Rogers showed us that the neighborhood is not a fantasy place where all these different people got together and everything is happily ever after. Mister Rogers showed us that when you have diverse people with their different opinions, you have conflict. That's what happens in the neighborhood.

Mister Rogers was once asked if the Neighborhood of Make Believe with King Friday, X the Owl & Henrietta Pussycat, Lady Elaine Fairchild, and Daniel Striped Tiger, was really heaven. Mister Rogers said it is a model of what church can be like. Very different people living together, seeing one another and appreciating one another for who they uniquely are. Fred Rogers said that when he pictured heaven, there was no fear or doubt or disillusionment or anxiety. Heaven for Mister Rogers was where people really do look at you with the eyes of Jesus. That is, eyes that see what is wonderful about our neighbor. Eyes that see the invisible and the essential in one another.

When Mister Rogers called us neighbors, he was calling us gently but firmly out of our structures of power. He was calling us out of our silos of sameness. He was calling us into lives of mercy and care for one another. Maybe Mister Rogers was overly optimistic, maybe he was calling us something better than we actually are. Maybe he believed that if he got to us while we were young, if he told us again and again that we were good, that we were lovable, and that we could extend mercy, maybe we could grow into real neighbors to one another. Maybe we still can.

So, who in our path needs help? What do their wounds look like? Not everyone who needs help will bleed in obvious ways.¹ When we can't help in a direct way, how can we be like the innkeeper and play a supporting role? What resources do we have to share? When is sharing our financial resources the best way we can help? I was talking with Bill Holston this week and he said that no one likes this particular answer but providing financial support for those agencies that are providing free legal services to asylum seekers is the best way to help. Human Rights Initiative of North Texas, RAICES (Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services), and Catholic Charities are all good options. When do we need to play a more active role in bandaging wounds? What other ways can we show love for our neighbors? How do we translate love into action? These are all good questions that we can ask ourselves.

The story of the Good Samaritan isn't just about simple, private, moral acts, it is also about systemic action. As we hear this story today, we want to tend the man's wounds but we also want to make sure that the road between Jerusalem and Jericho is well lit and that the communities around it have sufficient economic opportunity to deter crime.² We don't want to only help with the effects of evil, we want to uproot the causes of evil.

For Jesus a neighbor isn't just the person next door, a neighbor isn't just the person who looks like me, but a neighbor is any person in need. Jesus also gives another twist because this story is also about us being helped by others. The neighbor is the one who showed mercy, the person who responds to our needs. But what if we are helped by someone we did not expect to help us or perhaps even someone we did not want to help us. Could the lawyer accept help from the Samaritan, from someone that he had been raised to hate? Who would it be hard for you to receive help from?

Jesus is inviting us to identify with each other through our vulnerability and our shared human need, but when we give help and when we receive it. In our need and in our abundance, we are bound to each other in our vulnerability and mortality. It's like that old joke about how nothing is certain in this life except death and taxes. But, if we are talking about vulnerability and mortality, maybe it would be better to say nothing is certain in this life except for death and heartache. Do you remember in the Princess Bride movie where Buttercup tells the

¹ <https://mailchi.mp/christiancentury.org/sc-free-349495?e=d6e1e42378>

² <https://www.davidlose.net/2019/07/pentecost-5-c-what-the-good-samaritan-teaches-us-about-god/>

Man In Black, “You mock my pain!” and the Man In Black tells Buttercup, “Life is pain, Highness! Anyone who says otherwise is selling something.”

All of us will experience pain, hurt and heartache in our lives, and Jesus in this story is encouraging us to open ourselves up to one another because we never know who we will receive help from. We are all human and children of God. Our Youth and Children Minister Kristin Mallory talks about how our children are a blessing. She takes chapstick and makes a cross or a heart on their foreheads or on their hands and tells them that they are a blessing. She encourages them to give blessings as well. I was visiting with our previous youth minister, Gary Fox, this week. He is now a chaplain at Presbyterian Village North. He visits the residents there and gives them a blessing. He tells them, “You are a child of God. God loves you. God is well pleased with you/God is proud of you. God hears your prayers.” Gary loves the idea of blessing so much that he has chapstick by his front door and when his daughter Olivia goes to school he puts a heart (she prefers a heart) on her forehead and says, “You are my daughter. I love you. I am proud of you. I will listen to you.”

There’s one more interesting thing about this story. Did you notice how at the beginning of the story the lawyer asks about eternal life but at the end of the story Jesus says, “Go and do the same.” In some translations Jesus says, “Do this and you will live.” The lawyer is asking about eternal life and Jesus responds with right now. Living with God isn’t something that happens in heaven but it is something to be lived, acted out, and embraced right now. We live in the kingdom of God right now by seeing others with compassion, seeing others as fellow members of God’s family, seeing others in our shared dependence on God’s grace and each other.³

The God that Jesus teaches us about is concerned about how we treat each other now. God wants us to help each other flourish now. God wants all things good for all of God’s children now. You are a child of God. God loves you. God is well pleased with you. God hears your prayers. May we say those words of dignity, compassion, and respect to one another with our mouths and with our actions. Amen.

³ <https://www.davidlose.net/2019/07/pentecost-5-c-what-the-good-samaritan-teaches-us-about-god/>