

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
February 12, 2017

Love Your Neighbor

Luke 10:25-37

After saying so much about loving God in last Sunday's sermon, it seems only natural to follow it up with a message about loving your neighbor, especially since the two are so inseparable in Jewish and Christian life and thought. There's plenty of evidence for that in today's Scripture passage from Luke. This is one of the most memorable and beloved texts in the whole Bible. We usually refer to it as the parable or story of the Good Samaritan.

The language and imagery of the story have worked their way into our contemporary culture, even when the context isn't a specifically religious one. Today, we use the expression "Good Samaritan" broadly to describe anyone who does something good for another person in need, particularly if doing good involves making some sort of sacrifice. Giving a cancer patient a ride to their chemotherapy appointment. Helping a stranded motorist push their car out of the snow and ice. Delivering some groceries to an elderly, homebound individual. Providing toys to a child who otherwise might not receive any Christmas gifts. These are episodes of a Good Samaritan in action.

One morning this past week, on my way to the church, I was heading down the hill toward the intersection of Hawthorne Road and Mitchell Road in LaPlata. I spotted a car moving very slowly through the intersection, with its emergency lights flashing. Some kind of mechanical problem had almost brought it to a standstill. I could tell the driver behind it was running out of patience, and soon gunned the engine to make a quick move and pass by on the other side.

Next it was my turn. The debate got underway in my head. You know, if I stop here in the middle of the intersection to lend a hand, I might just complicate the flow of morning traffic even further. Better to just keep going. After all, the driver probably has a cell phone anyway and can call someone for help. Plus, I remember this as the spot where Debby, her mother, and Bethany were struck by another driver several years ago. Maybe I shouldn't hang around such a dangerous intersection. And perhaps the most important factor of all. I'm on my way to the church, to do important religious work, especially the studying and praying I need to do about next Sunday's sermon Scripture. I don't have time to stop and actually be a Good Samaritan. I need to get to the serenity of my office where I can do research on the Good Samaritan!

But thank goodness for this compelling parable. Just the sheer recollection of the story, especially Jesus' closing admonition, "Go and do likewise," was enough to get me patiently through the intersection and eventually over to the shoulder of the road, from where I could walk up and see if there were anything I could do. The good news is that by that point, the ailing vehicle had for some reason come back to life, and drove past me at normal speed. The morning commute was back on track, and all was well. Soon I was here at the church office, sitting in front of my computer and ruminating on that age-old question, "Who is my neighbor?"

That's the question asked by the lawyer in today's text. He's not a lawyer in the contemporary sense of the term. He's actually more of an expert in religious law, a seminary graduate who's skilled in analyzing, parsing, and interpreting God's rules for living. He poses a question to Jesus about how he can participate in the resurrection and the life of the world to come. "Well, you're the expert in the Law," said Jesus. "What does it say?" The lawyer answers by citing Scripture, the "law of love" that we heard last Sunday from Deuteronomy: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'" (v. 27a). And along with that, "'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (v. 27b). "Well, there you have it," said Jesus. "Love God fully and love your neighbor as yourself. Do this and you'll have life."

But the lawyer is accustomed to using questions to press for details. He knows that different people fill the term "neighbor" with different meanings. So he challenges Jesus to define his terms. "The way you see it, who is my neighbor?" asks the lawyer. And Jesus answers not by offering a tidy, two or three sentence Bible dictionary definition of neighbor, but by telling a story.

A man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, a route notorious for muggings and robberies. Thieves attacked him and left him half dead, lying in the ditch, an anonymous victim of human brutality. Two religious people come upon the scene. The first one is a priest. He's knowledgeable in the law and responsible for offering sacrifices on behalf of people who come to the temple. In the eyes of most folks, he's a pillar of the community. But instead of helping the victim, he keeps a safe distance and goes on his way. Next comes a Levite, sort of a second-ranking figure to the priest in Jewish religious life. He too works at the temple, studies the law, and is familiar with its expectations. Yet he also decides not to get involved with the victim, and continues on his way. So much for getting any help from the local clergy.

About two years ago, a five-year-old boy in New Zealand was hit by a car on his way to school. A man named Harman Singh, who lived in the vicinity, heard car wheels screeching and ran out to investigate. Though others were already there to help, Singh, an adherent of the Sikh faith, wanted to do whatever he could to help. In this case, that meant taking the exceptional step of removing his turban in public and using it to cradle the boy's bleeding head. "Being a Sikh myself," said Singh, "I know what type of respect the turban has. People don't just take it off—people die over it." But under the circumstances, Singh acknowledged that he wasn't thinking about the turban, but about the boy's need for help.¹

Sometimes religious protocol has to be set aside in order to do what's right. Maybe the priest and the Levite were worried that making contact with the body would defile them and disqualify them from doing their jobs at the temple. Maybe they were concerned that the body on the roadside was a plant designed to attract other potential victims. Maybe they had appointments to keep, committee meetings to lead, and sermons to prepare. When we ourselves suddenly and unexpectedly come upon someone in need, don't we too often start weighing the options and running through the mental list of reasons why we should just remain a bystander?

But then along comes the third character in Jesus' story. Rather than be a bystander, he turns pity into action. Surely he must be a good and faithful member of the Jewish faith, like Jesus, like the lawyer, like most of the other folks who were in the crowd of listeners. No, he's a Samaritan. Though we've attached the adjective "Good," that word never actually shows up in the text. That's because Samaritans and Jews didn't get along. Their racial and religious division ran deep. They had been enemies for a long time. In other words, a Samaritan is the other, the enemy, the despised. And yet this very person whose

ethnicity was ambiguous, whose doctrine was questionable, and whose religious purity was deeply suspect—this outsider—is the one who actually shows kindness to the man in the ditch.

And not just in a minimal way. According to Jesus, the Samaritan invested a lot of time, energy, and resources in providing for the man. He delayed his own journey. He risked danger to himself. He transported the man to a place where he could receive more extensive care. He spent two days' wages and guaranteed reimbursement for any further expenses. He promised to follow up on what he had started. "So now, having heard this story," says Jesus, "let me ask you how you would define the term 'neighbor'? Among the three who came upon the scene of suffering, which one proved to be a neighbor?" And the lawyer, unable to even say the word "Samaritan," simply says, "The one who had mercy on him." "Go and do likewise," says Jesus (v. 37).

In his book, *Jesus the Middle-Eastern Storyteller*, Gary Burge tells about a story he heard from a theology professor in Jerusalem describing a modern-day Good Samaritan:

Not long ago in Jerusalem's famed Hadassh Hospital, an Israeli soldier lay dying. He had contracted AIDS as a result of his gay lifestyle and was now in the last stages of the disease's terrible course. His father was a famous Jerusalem rabbi, and both he and the rest of his family had disowned him. He was condemned to die in his shame. The nursing staff on his floor knew his story and carefully avoided his room. Everyone was simply waiting for his life to expire.

The soldier happened to be part of a regiment that patrolled the Occupied West Bank, and his unit was known for its ferocity and war-fighting skills. The Palestinians living in occupation hated these troops. They were merciless and could be cruel. Their green berets always gave them away.

One evening the soldier went into cardiac arrest. All the usual alarms went off, but the nursing staff did not respond. Even the doctors looked the other way. Yet on the floor another man was at work—a Palestinian Christian janitor—who knew this story as well and also knew the meaning of the emergency. *Incredibly, he was a man whose village had been attacked by this soldier's unit.* When the Palestinian heard the alarm and witnessed the neglect, his heart was filled with compassion. He dropped his broom, entered the soldier's room, and attempted to resuscitate the man by giving him cardiopulmonary resuscitation. The scene was remarkable: a poor Palestinian man, a victim of this soldier's violence, now tried to save his enemy while those who should have been doing this stood on the sidelines...

Burge goes on to say, "When you understand what it means for an enemy to love an enemy—and for the righteous to show neglect—then you will have a picture of the power of God's grace at work in a person's heart."²

It takes the grace of God working in our hearts to help us love our neighbor on God's terms rather than just our own. "Who is my neighbor?" In our text, the lawyer's question sounds like it's designed to narrow down, rather than broaden, the definition of neighbor. Maybe he wants to be selective about who's in and who's out. But the fact is, our definition of neighbor is determined by God's definition of neighbor. And God's definition of neighbor is revealed in Jesus Christ.

Remember that when the lawyer identified the Samaritan as the one who was truly a neighbor, he described him as "showing mercy." In Luke's Gospel, instances of "compassion" and "mercy" are usually associated with acts of God, or God's agent, Jesus. So when the lawyer is admonished to follow the example of the Good Samaritan in showing compassion and doing mercy, he's being urged to follow the example of Christ himself, who

is God's way of being neighbor to us. In other words, we're all lying by the roadside in the ditch, desperately in need of the Lord's mercy and compassion. We all need to be rescued. And thanks be to God, who is moved with pity and does not pass us by. On the contrary, in Christ, God comes as near to us as near can get. He takes up our cause and gets involved in our plight. He rubs on the ointment of forgiveness and applies the bandage of reconciliation. As preacher Thomas Long puts it, Jesus "speaks tenderly to us, lifts us into his arms, and takes us to the place of healing. As Paul said, while we were still God's enemies, God saw us in the ditch and had compassion, and in Jesus came to save us."³

So now, go and do likewise. Extend to others the same mercy and compassion that have been extended to you in Christ. Rely not on your own effort or strength, but on the grace and power of God to get the job of righteousness done. The truth is, we often struggle to figure out the right thing to do. And even when we figure it out and know our moral obligation, that doesn't guarantee we can do it. Sometimes we get tangled up in weighing the risks with our responsibilities, and suddenly realize that the window of opportunity has closed. Sometimes we deliberate and deliberate and deliberate as a way of staying on the sidelines rather than moving into action. Sometimes we assume that another person will come along to help. Sometimes we think, "Well, that's their problem," when in fact we should be taking steps to make their problem our problem too. Sometimes we're so focused on "I" that there's no sense of "we."

But the story of the Good Samaritan endures, and with it God's command: "'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, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

¹ Anna Leask, "Sikh Puts Religious Rule Aside to Help Boy." New Zealand Herald website. May 16, 2015. Accessed February 9, 2017 <http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11449538>.

²Gary M. Burge, *Jesus the Middle-Eastern Story Teller* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009) 24-25.

³ Thomas G. Long, "Meeting the Good Samaritan." A sermon at the Day1 website. July 15, 2007. Accessed February 9, 2017 <http://day1.org/1051-meeting_the_good_samaritan>.