

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
January 14, 2024

Your Neighbor

Exodus 22:21-27

“Won’t you be my neighbor?” That was the question, and the song, that Mister Rogers made famous. “It’s a beautiful day in this neighborhood, / A beautiful day for a neighbor. / Would you be mine? / Could you be mine?”

Fred Rogers was also a Presbyterian minister whose Christian convictions helped shape his approach to human relationships, especially his work with children. While attending seminary, one of Rogers’s professors, Dr. Orr, left a particular impression, mainly because he not only taught theology but lived it as well. Rogers described him this way:

Oh, we learned about epistemology and Christology, and eschatology, sanctification and justification, and existentialism, but most of all, we witnessed the unfolding of life of one of God’s saints. Dr. Orr would be quick to remind me that we’re all saints, we believers; nevertheless, when you see someone go out to lunch on a winter’s day and come back without his overcoat because he had given it to a person who was cold, you have a growing understanding of “living theologically.” When we asked Dr. Orr about the coat, he said, “Oh, I have another one at home.” And that was all he ever said about it.¹

Today’s text from Exodus includes a case of a poor man with no property who puts up his only coat as collateral for a loan. According to God’s guidelines for his people, this form of lending was permissible. But the lender is only permitted to retain the coat during the day. It needs to be returned at night, because it’s the poor man’s means of staying warm. He needs the coat as a blanket overnight. This creates a seemingly ridiculous scenario in which the creditor goes to the house of the poor man every night to drop off the coat, then shows up again the next morning to pick it up. From a practical standpoint, this type of part-time collateral really doesn’t represent much collateral at all.

Maybe this practice has less to do with securing a debt and more to do with the problem of charging interest that deprives the poor of even more than a coat. That’s the issue in the verse right before the case of the pawned coat. And notice how the text closes with an accent on the motivation for ensuring that the poor man can stay warm at night. The motivation is God’s compassion. “What else will [the poor man] sleep in?” says the Lord. “When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate” (v. 27).

So the Lord hears on behalf of the weak and opposes the abusive practices of the strong. This shouldn’t come as news to God’s people. It has always been an indispensable part of who they are. Note how our text begins with a command not to mistreat those who are on the social margins, not simply because God wills it as the right thing to do, but also because God’s people themselves were once in bondage and on the margins. “For you were aliens in Egypt” (v. 21). They know firsthand what it means to be a social minority. What God did for them by rescuing them from captivity defines them and determines the way that they themselves should relate to those who are vulnerable, threatened, and unprotected. When it comes to how the Lord’s people live out their theology, the memory of the exodus is always there. Therefore the God who heard the cries of his people when they were in Egypt will hear the cry of the poor man whose coat is his only means of keeping warm. This is the man referred to as “your neighbor” (v. 27).

Who is my neighbor? How is my neighbor to be regarded and treated? These are some of the Bible's most enduring and pressing questions. The Hebrew word usually translated as "neighbor" has a basic meaning of "to associate with." The Scriptural emphasis is on our connectedness as human beings, which means that being in community with God and each other is the substance of wholeness, or *shalom*. Though the term "neighbor" is regularly used to refer to a person who lives close by, often next door, in the Bible the term generally refers to people who aren't members of one's family, one's people. This expansive understanding of "neighbor" encompasses the stranger, the outsider, the other, even the enemy.

But loving your "neighbor" is about more than just getting the definition right. Most of all, it's about being grounded in the heart of God and reflecting the heart of God. That's what the extended body of laws here in this part of the book of Exodus is all about. It's about God governing every part of life. It's about God's people discerning the mind and will of the Lord in matters of worship, economics, sexuality, and social responsibility. And at the foundation of God's will is mercy, compassion, and love.

Henri Nouwen has captured it well when he says, "When we love God with all our heart, mind, strength, and soul, we cannot do other than love our neighbor, and our very selves. It is by being fully rooted in the heart of God that we are creatively connected with our neighbor as well as our deepest self."² Notice how Nouwen stresses being "rooted in the heart of God." This means that loving your neighbor has to do with more than just obeying a divine command, though that's certainly an important part of it. Most of all, it has to do with obedience that's governed by God's compassion. It means living in such solidarity with God that you live in solidarity with your neighbor as well.

In our text, the accent is on the human connection between the prosperous person who's lending and the poor man who's borrowing. This man who has little more than the coat on his back is more than just an economic unit, a financial statistic, or a number in the system. He's more than just a necessary component in the "market." He's more than just a neighbor. He's *your* neighbor. He's part of the fabric of humanity that gets torn and damaged when economic power is exercised for personal gain at the expenses of a greater good, the common good. The poor man is a real person with real pain, real needs, and real hope.

On this weekend when we remember and honor the life and witness of Martin Luther King, Jr., it's good to recall how he wrote, "Any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of (people) and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that can scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried."³ Like Fred Rogers's professor, whom I mentioned earlier, we're called to a living theology, a theology that summons and enables us to give the coat off our back, whatever form that may take, in order to practice the reality of God's kingdom.

As one commentator has pointed out, the laws in today's text highlight two intertwined convictions, namely, that devotion to the Lord is inseparable from love of neighbor. If we're going to say, "God reigns," then we can't avoid also saying, "the poor neighbor counts."⁴ We may have legitimate debates and discussions about the causes and remedies of poverty, or about the specific things that each of us can and should do, or not do, when deciding on the best way to help someone in need. But whatever specific actions we choose to take, they need to be grounded in the good news of God's sovereignty and mercy, with full awareness that spiritual realities include the economic and material realities of people's lives.

Carolyn Arends is a Christian musician, author, and speaker. In a magazine article, she wrote:

Years ago, I toured as an opening act for Rich Mullins. I loved overhearing conversations at the autograph table; they often turned serious and urgent.

More than once, a fan asked Rich how to discern the will of God. Rich would listen and then offer an unexpected perspective. He'd say, "I don't think finding God's plan for you has to be complicated. God's will is that you love him with all your heart and soul and mind, and also that you love your neighbor as yourself. Get busy with that, and then, if God wants you to do something unusual, he'll take care of it. Say, for example, he wants you to go to Egypt." Rich would pause for a moment before flashing his trademark grin. "If that's the case, he'll provide 11 jealous brothers, and they'll sell you into slavery."

When I find myself wrestling with life decisions, I think of Rich's Egypt Principle. It makes me laugh, and then it asks me to get down to the serious business of determining which of my options allow me to best love God and other people.⁵

Arends's reflections can be a good guideline for us, not only in life's major moves and big decisions, but also in the daily choices we make about how to discern and do the will of God. That, as I noted earlier, is what this section of the book of Exodus is all about. It's about how God's people are to discern the mind and will of the Lord in every part of daily life. If God truly reigns, which is what we most fundamentally profess and preach, then what will God's governance look like in your relationship with your neighbor.

The sixteenth century painter El Greco once depicted a story known as "St. Martin and the Beggar." St. Martin lived in the fourth century, and converted to Christianity when he a boy. He was conscripted into military service, which helped give his parents assurance that he would at least have a respectable occupation.

Early on in his military service, Martin encountered a beggar. In El Greco's painting, it's the dead of winter. Many have already died from exposure to the cold. The soldier Martin comes across a poor naked man at the city gates of Amiens in Gaul. Martin takes off his emerald green cloak, drapes it over his lap, and prepares to cut it in half with his sword. In this case, half of a cloak will mean survival for the beggar. But even before Martin divides the cloak in half, it covers the beggar, indicating the unity of the two men, a unity created by love. As the story goes, a few weeks later, this same beggar appears to Martin in a dream. He is Christ.

Your neighbor, whoever that person may be, can be one of the ways that you encounter and meet God, which means that loving your neighbor is an essential way of loving God. We've just spent recent weeks remembering and reflecting on how this just and compassionate God has come to us with salvation through Jesus the Messiah. He has brought about our exodus from captivity to sin and death, and has brought us into the realm of his governance, his reign of life and light. But our belief that he reigns has to be fleshed out in the ways that you live in solidarity with your neighbor, rather than retreating into a zone of comfortable isolation or pursuing personal gain at the expense of others. Loving your neighbor means recognizing their humanity and your humanity. It means recognizing their need and your need. It means that through your deeds of compassion and mercy toward them, you serve not only your neighbor, but your God as well.

¹ Fred Rogers, "Neighbor: Nourishing Our Life Together." *The Living Pulpit* (July-September 2002) 4.

² Quoted in *The Living Pulpit* (July-September 2002) 27.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Dream of a Common Language*. Quoted in *The Living Pulpit*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (January-March 1993) 31.

⁴ See the comments of Walter Brueggeman, "The Book of Exodus," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) n.p.

⁵ Carolyn Arends, Consolation Prize." *Christianity Today* (June 2013) 64.