

“Neighbor” Is a Verb
Luke 10:25-37

Georgetown Presbyterian Church
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This morning’s scripture lesson is one of the most familiar stories in the Bible. It is only told in the gospel according to Luke, but it has become a universal teaching concerning the standard of kindness and mercy to which we are held. The story has had such an influence that anybody who does a good deed for a stranger is called a “Good Samaritan”. Around the world, mission hospitals have been given the name, “Good Samaritan Hospital.”

And so it is a familiar story that most of us have heard before. It is a story that was told in response to a series of questions a biblical expert posed to Jesus. The first question was, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” That question, when turned back on the biblical expert by Jesus, resulted in the quoting of the two great commandments from the Old Testament: “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 To that answer, Jesus responded to the man who was questioning him: “You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.”²

But the expert countered Jesus with a second question: Who is my neighbor?³ The answer Jesus gave is the parable of the Good Samaritan. After telling the parable, Jesus asked the man in front of him, which character in the story was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? When the man gave Jesus his answer indicating that it was the Samaritan traveler who was the neighbor, Jesus then replied, “Go and do likewise.”⁴

The expert in the law wants to make “neighbor” an object that can be limited and defined narrowly, so that he can justify himself and receive the eternal life he thinks he deserves. But Jesus says that there’s more to it than that. Jesus redirects the conversation in such a way that “neighbor” is a verb—it is a way of being, a way of relating to others, a way of becoming for others. Neighbor isn’t so much the object of our love, as it truly is someone we become. Neighbor, in the eyes of Jesus, is something we do. Neighbor is a verb.

You see, the expert in the law was asking a question from the wrong motivation. He simply wanted to justify himself. The Bible says, “Love your neighbor,” and the expert in the law wants to be able to say he’s done that. He wants to check off that requirement and put it behind him. He’s a smart man, and he knows his Scripture.

But Jesus lets him – and us – know that eternal life is about more than just knowing the right things. It’s no mistake that the first two people who encounter the man who had been robbed, beaten, and left for dead are people who knew exactly what the law commanded of them in situations like this. Both the

¹ Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18

² Luke 10:28

³ Luke 10:29

⁴ Luke 10:37

priest and the Levite know God's law. Both would have known that the law of God contains commandments to love your neighbor. Both would have known that the law of God told them to care for the stranger among them. Both would have known that God's law called them to help those in need.

But the law of God also says that when you touch a corpse or come in contact with blood, you are unclean and you have to stay out of the community until you can be deemed clean once again.

And Jesus tells us what the priest and the Levite chose: they chose to preserve their own cleanliness, and they passed by on the other side of the road. Two people who were in the best position to know how to respond, did nothing.

It takes more than right knowledge to experience eternal life, doesn't it? Simply knowing the doctrine and being an expert on the rules doesn't quite get us there. Right knowledge is useful insofar as it points us in the right direction, but there's got to be more than right knowledge. You have to move from knowledge to action. "Neighbor," says Jesus, is not something that we can check off our list of accomplishments; Neighbor is a verb, it is a way of being, a way of relating to those we encounter.

We shouldn't be too hard on the priest and the Levite. They simply acted on the same self-preserving impulse that is so strong in you and me. What they did is what we come to expect in our world, and not even the most religious folks are immune from acting on the same impulse.

Some years ago a famous experiment was conducted with seminary students. Researchers gathered a group of ministry students in a classroom and told them that each of them had an assignment. Their assignment was to record a talk about the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The thing was, the recordings were going to be done in a building on the other side of the campus, and because of a tight schedule, they needed to hurry to that building. Unbeknownst to the students, on the path to the other building the researchers had planted an actor to play the part of a man in distress, slumped in an alley, coughing and suffering.

The students were going to make a presentation about the Good Samaritan. But what would happen, the researchers wondered, when they actually encountered a man in need? Would they be Good Samaritans? Well, no, as a matter of fact, they were not. Almost all of them rushed past the hurting man. One student even stepped over the man's body as he hurried to teach about the Parable of the Good Samaritan!⁵

Scott Black Johnston notes that the most difficult journey is the hike from a right answer to right action.⁶ The challenge before us is to let the head and the heart work in concert with each other, so that the impulse we act upon is the impulse of compassion, and mercy, and love. You see, if our goal is simply to justify ourselves, as was the goal of the expert in the law, then we're never going to experience eternal life. Jesus shows us that the fulfillment of the law is not in defining who is or who is not our neighbor, but in demonstrating through compassion and mercy that we are a neighbor to those we encounter. It is not so much in looking for a neighbor to love, as it is in being a neighbor for those we encounter, especially those in need. "Neighbor" is a verb, it's something we do for others, it's a way we relate to the world around us.

The Holocaust of the Jewish people in World War II is well documented. Millions of Jews were

⁵ Story recounted in a sermon by Thomas Long, "Meeting the Good Samaritan," www.day1.org. The experiment is described in Darley, J.M., and Batson, C.D., "From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1973, pp. 100-108.

⁶ Dr. Scott Black Johnston, "The Reading Lesson," July 11, 2004, www.day1.org

slaughtered as a result of the Nazi policy of genocide. It wasn't really a secret. People knew when they saw the trains packed with people and the smoke coming from the camps 24 hours a day, that the Jews were being systematically annihilated. But most people just passed by on the other side of the street, turning a blind eye to the atrocities. Even the Christian church largely ignored the plight of the Jews.

And yet there were some who refused to pass by, people who opened their doors and gave the Jews sanctuary, people who smuggled Jews to safety, all at peril to their own lives. People like Corrie Ten Boom and her sister Betsie. People like Oskar Schindler, a member of the Nazi party, but someone who used his factory to provide safety and sanctuary for Jews.

The most difficult journey is the hike from knowing the right thing, to doing the right thing. And yet it is the journey we must take if we are to experience eternal life. "Neighbor" is a verb.

At the end of the story, Jesus asks the expert in the law, "Which... was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" In asking that question, Jesus helps us to see that to ask, "Who is my neighbor?" as a way of justifying ourselves is the wrong question to ask. Instead of worrying about who's "in" and who's "out", says Jesus, just be a neighbor for everyone you encounter. Don't worry about defining who your "neighbor" is, because clearly your neighbor includes friends, strangers, and even enemies. The truth is, your neighborhood is far larger than you ever considered. Instead of worrying about whether or not someone is your neighbor, simply BE a neighbor for them—be the one who shows mercy, compassion, kindness, and love.

Barbara Johnson is a Christian humorist, a prolific writer, and a speaker at numerous Christian conferences. The other day I came across this humorous tidbit she wrote that reminds me a bit of the story of the Good Samaritan:

A man fell into a pit and couldn't get himself out. A subjective person came along and, seeing the man, she said, "I feel for you down there."

An objective person came along and, seeing the man, he said, "It's logical that someone would fall down there."

A Pharisee came along and, seeing the man in the pit, said, "Only bad people fall into a pit."

A mathematician calculated how the man fell into the pit.

A news reporter wanted an exclusive story on the man's pit.

A fundamentalist saw the man in the pit and said, "You deserve your pit."

An IRS man asked if the man was paying taxes on the pit.

A self-pitying person said, "You haven't seen anything until you've seen my pit."

An optimist said, "Things could be worse."

A pessimist said, "Things will get worse."

Jesus, seeing the man, took him by the hand and lifted him out of the pit!

Go and do likewise. Amen.