SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Truth about Neighbors

Luke 10:25-37

October 9, 2022

This is the most memorable story Jesus ever told. Most of us could describe the narrative by heart. The characters. The twist at the end. The moral of the parable neatly summarized at its conclusion. Indeed, the epithet "Good Samaritan" is well known to us; it is synonymous with "compassionate do-gooder." We've heard it again just in recent days as ordinary citizens go out of their way to care for others in need after natural disaster. "Good Samaritans" we call them.

It is precisely this familiarity that can make the parable overly predictable. You find yourself sitting back and waiting for the Samaritan to do what he always does: the right thing. The truth, though, is that his deed defies conventional wisdom. The parable is not simply meant to be enjoyed. This story demands transformation in its audience.

How might we reclaim the intrinsic power of this ancient parable?

One way, I think, is to consider the context in which it was told. We're in the tenth chapter of Luke's gospel, and at the end of chapter nine, "Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem." That's the beginning of a journey from the Galilean countryside to the Holy City that will occupy most of the middle of Luke's gospel. Here at the outset, Jesus sends messengers ahead to prepare a place for him to stay in the village that they are about to enter. But there is a problem. A problem with that village. You see, Jesus and his followers are Judeans—Jews—and the town he wants to stay in is a Samaritan town. For long historical and religious reasons, the animosity between the two groups ran deep in Jesus' time. And so, his disciples, seeking lodging in a Samaritan town, are turned away. In response, they have a suggestion for Jesus. "Hey, Jesus, why don't we command that fire come down from heaven and consume this Samaritan town?" It's a bit of an overreaction. Jesus shrugs it off, moves on to the next village hoping for friendlier reception. Still, as we hear this morning's parable, it is helpful to know that the bitter conflict between Jews and Samaritans would have been on the mind of the disciples and should be on our minds as well.

Because, just up the road, Jesus is teaching when a lawyer stands up and asks a question, Luke says, to test him. And while the attorney's motives might be sus, I am sympathetic to the simple directness of the question. "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

It's a good question. But he has come to the wrong person if he is looking for an equally direct answer. Rather than satisfy the lawyer with a simple response, Jesus invites him into dialogue, into reflection, into conversation, into interpretation. "You're a lawyer. What is written in the law? What do you read there? Give me your interpretation."

Jesus is dealing with a legal professional, and so the answer that he receives is a good one. It's creative. The lawyer combines two of the most well-known verses in all of Hebrew scripture, pulling from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 to end up with a comprehensive two-part statement of all proper ethical conduct: Love God with everything you've got; love your neighbor as yourself. *It's a good answer*. In fact, Jesus says the same thing in Matthew and Mark. But here in Luke, he pushes this attorney a little farther, a little closer to gospel truth—to the place where words meet actions.

Do this and you will live.

Just one more question, the attorney responds. "Who is my neighbor?" It is the impetus for the greatest parable ever told. Who is my neighbor? Or, put another way, when combined with the attorney's first question, whom must I love? And at what distance, physically, geographically, emotionally, spiritually, can I stop loving? What are the boundaries of my neighborhood? When can I simply turn away and say with an exasperated sigh, "You know, I'd love to help you, but the law says you're not my neighbor and therefore I have no legal obligation to love you. You are not my responsibility. You are not my neighbor. Your skin color or culture or political affiliation or religious conviction or deeply held passion is different from mine, and so you must not be my neighbor." The lawyer asks a good question.

Who is my neighbor? And, perhaps more importantly, who is not?

You can almost hear Jesus say under his breath, "Now we are getting somewhere," as he begins the story of the Good Samaritan. An unidentified man walking a treacherous nineteen-mile path from Jerusalem to Jericho is assaulted, robbed, and left for dead in the ditch. The man is fortunate enough that two professional religious leaders—not one, but *two*—come by in his hour of greatest need. And *both* carefully avoid a human in dire need. Why? They have the answer; they know the law.

Not my neighbor. Not my responsibility. It is their interpretation of the law that enables them to abandon an abused man.

Finally, Jesus introduces the surprise at the center of the parable: a Samaritan, a foreigner, an outsider, an enemy of the Jews. Surely there were gasps in the crowd as Jesus describes the actions of this hated man. Surely no Samaritan would do what he does. He is moved with pity. He acts with tenderness and compassion, despite major inconvenience. The extravagance of his response shows the dramatic contrast between this supposed enemy and the two supposedly religious upright figures.

And then, with the shock of the story still lingering, Jesus transposes the question of the lawyer. Not "who is my neighbor?" but "who was a neighbor to the one in need?" Of course, the question needs no response, but the attorney replies, "The one who showed him mercy." Of course. The one who observed the suffering of another and saw a neighbor in need.

In his "I Have Been to the Mountaintop" speech, the night before his own assassination, Martin Luther King, Jr. makes a similar transposition of the message of the parable. He describes how "The first question that the Levite asked was, 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?'" But the Good Samaritan reverses the question. "'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"[i]

That shift makes all the difference in the world because the parable of the Good Samaritan is not a story about the law. It is a story of relationships. Whose neighbor are you? Whose neighbor are we? You see, it's not the kind of question that can be answered with a clever combination of the right words. It's not the kind of question that demands a legal definition. It's not the type of question that can be answered by logic or rational thought. Because this parable is not concerned with your theological precision or your knowledge of the Levitical code. This question demands transformation.

Go and do likewise. Do this and you will live.

Yes, when it comes to these stories of Jesus, context always matters. Not just his (the bitter conflict between Jews and Samaritans) but ours as well. Let me suggest that the parable of the Good Samaritan is not meant to serve as a pithy proverb that makes us think more deeply; this is a call to action. This is a reprimand to any church that spends too much time obsessed with itself and too little time serving a world in need. This story is a reprimand against a church too busy asking, "Who has the right answer?"

to consider the question, "Whose neighbor are we called to be?"

In recent weeks, I've been a part of some stimulating conversations about the role of the church in our time. One of the phrases that has been employed in those conversations—with appreciation by some and a little consternation by others—is the phrase "activist church." As in, "I'd like to see us be a more activist church." Or, "I don't want any part of an activist church." Ah, life at Second Presbyterian Church!

As I prayed and wondered about this, it occurred to me that the definition of the term "activist church" matters far less than our answer to the question, "Who is our neighbor?" and "Whose neighbor are we?" Because, you see, when we know that there are those among us and around us who are suffering, *that's the question* that will determine our response. If *they* are strangers, if they are other than us, if they are distant from our own experience of the world, then we can safely ignore their pain, pass by on the other side, confident that the neighborhood boundaries extend just that far. But if our vision is transformed by Christ, we are called to act as neighbors. We will do what it takes to care.

These divergent paths take on a particular feel in the Church of Jesus Christ. When we distance ourselves from the suffering of others and insist that our concern only extends to the spiritual, then we tend to think of food insecurity, or safe housing, or educational opportunity, or fair wages, or affordable childcare as "issues" that belong in the political sphere.

Not our neighbors. Not our responsibility. We can carefully pass by on the other side.

In December of 1861, a Presbyterian pastor and theologian in South Carolina named James Henley Thornwell wrote a theological justification for this kind of distancing. In South Carolina in1861, slavery was the central political issue. And the question James Henley Thornwell addressed was this one: What should the church say or do about slavery? Thornwell had an answer. The church should not say anything. It isn't our role, he wrote. A political matter, a matter for the state. The church should remain quiet.

Now we would all agree that Thornwell was wrong about that. But it's not hard to see how distance from the suffering of others enabled him to justify such a response. They passed by on the other side. Not my neighbor. Not my responsibility.

Jesus directs us in another way. It begins with acknowledgment. The Samaritan came near. If the struggling and the suffering among us are neighbors, then we will respond differently. We will learn the stories of those whose lives are most impacted by the rising cost of food and shelter, the lack of affordable housing, the growing achievement gap in our schools. We will bring our sometimes-dated perception into alignment with the current reality, that in Washington Township nearly one in five children under 18 are living in poverty. 5,480 children. Not strangers. Not issues. But children. Neighbors.

We will acknowledge that such dramatic need coexists alongside some of our city's most affluent and comfortable neighborhoods and most respected and connected institutions. Neighborhoods like ours. Institutions like this one.

Who was a neighbor to the one in need? Those who passed by on the other side, untouched by the suffering of a fellow child of God, who kept their distance and averted their eyes? Not my neighbor. Not my responsibility. *Of course not.*

The one who showed mercy. The one who got close enough to see pain in the eyes of another. The one who stopped, the one who stayed, the one who allowed himself to be transformed by what he saw.

When we look at those who struggle and see our neighbors, we know the responsibility that is ours. And we will not be silent. And we will not be

still. And we will not keep distant. We will draw close. We will stop, and we will stay. We will be transformed, and we will show mercy.

Because the one whom we follow, in whose name we gather, could not be clearer: Do *this* and you will live. Do *this* and yours will be a life worth living. Do *this*. Amen.

[i] Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have Been to the Mountaintop" speech, delivered April 3, 1968, Bishop Charles Mason Temple, Memphis, TN. http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm.