

“Become a Neighbor”

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Luke 10:25-37

²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”
²⁶He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” ²⁷He answered, “You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁸And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” ²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” ³⁷He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Sometimes, don’t you wish that Jesus would just answer the question? There’s an old joke: “A member of the synagogue approaches her rabbi and asks, ‘Why do rabbis always answer a question with a question?’ The rabbi ponders this for a moment and then says, ‘So, what’s wrong with asking questions?’”

The guy in our parable today asks his first question – “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And then Jesus answered with a question, or really two questions: “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” Jesus gives the expert in the law both the opportunity to recount what is recorded in scripture, and also the chance to give his understanding of it, as a learned person. He correctly gives the commandments, but then, as *The Message* paraphrase puts it, he “look[s] for a loophole” by asking “just who is my neighbor?”

He wanted a definition, so he could know who he was to love. He knew the commandments – he knew he was to love God with everything he has, and he was to love neighbor as self. So, then, he needed to know just *who* was his neighbor, so he could know who he was *required* to love. Of course, that’s the problem. His question was a *narrowing* question. He

wanted to know where he could draw the line around those he had to love. It's similar to when Peter asked Jesus how many times he had to forgive. *Seven times*, asks Peter? That's a lot of forgiveness; surely that's more than enough? This expert in the law wants a definition something like the one that Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner humorously imagined: "A neighbor (hereinafter referred to as the party of the first part) is to be construed as meaning a person of Jewish descent whose legal residence is within a radius of no more than three statute miles from one's own legal residence unless there is another person of Jewish descent (hereinafter to be referred to as the party of the second part) living closer to the party of the first part than one is oneself, in which case the party of the second part is to be construed as neighbor to the party of the first part and one is oneself relieved of all responsibility of any sort or kind whatsoever."¹

And that's not really stretching things *too* much from a common understanding of the day. When the expert in the law says that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, he is quoting from the second part of Leviticus 19:18. The *first* part, however, says "You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against any of *your own people*..." It finishes with "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" but the clear intention is that your "neighbor" is someone of your own kind. This is what he wanted Jesus to affirm. *I'll love my neighbor and my neighbor is someone like me who lives just down the street, right, Jesus?*

So, the expert in the law wanted to limit who deserved his love, he wanted to limit for whom he was to be responsible. Asking who *is* my neighbor is really asking "who is *not* my neighbor?"

And so, as Jesus responded to Peter that seven times is not nearly enough times to forgive – it's more like seventy times seven times, and really the number is limitless – Jesus likewise responds to this expert in the law that he's asking the question all wrong when he asks "who is my neighbor?" And Jesus doesn't answer that question. Instead, he tells a story, and it's a story with which most of our society is familiar. I think it's one with which perhaps we are a little *too* familiar, in that we have lessened the parable's impact on us. We have belittled its meaning. We all know what a "Good Samaritan" is: that's someone who helps out a stranger, right? And then we go and name things by this definition: hospitals, social aid organizations, a camping club, even "Good Samaritan Donkey Sanctuary" in Australia. All of these miss the point of the parable. The one who stops to help is not simply a stranger. Samaritans weren't strangers to the Jews; they were reviled enemies. The two groups had been feuding for over six hundred years. At one point, the Jews destroyed the temple of the Samaritans. The Samaritans once defiled the Jewish temple. Both groups claimed to follow the Torah, but each had different copies of it and each claimed their slightly different version to be the authentic one. To call the one who stopped to help simply a kind-hearted stranger does not get across the point that Jesus made, which is that we must come to think of *even our enemies* as neighbors. In short, love your enemies, love those who oppress you, love those who harm you. Modern parallels abound. An Illinois fan might be asked to think of an Indiana fan as their neighbor. More seriously, a leader in Black Lives Matter might be asked to

¹ <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/5/21/neighbor>

think of a leader in the KKK as their neighbor. Amy-Jill Levine, noted scholar of the Christian scriptures, once was addressing an audience who had experienced the horrors of September 11th firsthand, and she suggested that they might be asked to think of a member of Al-Qaeda as neighbor.

That's what Jesus calls us to. I'm not sure that *I'm* ready to go there just yet, so let's take it a few steps back. Two weeks ago just down the street from our church building, Todd Ledbetter, a man experiencing homelessness, was robbed and beaten to death. In a statement, Rob Dalhaus of C-U at Home said of Todd, "We had the privilege of calling him a friend, walking alongside him, and showing him grace and compassion when he was at his best or his worst. We will never forget him quoting scripture to our other friends and staff and countless interactions where he would encourage us while we were trying to uplift him." A friend of his said, "He would have given his last dollar away." Another friend described him as having "a big heart." Forget all of that, though, for a minute. He was homeless, or as C-U at Home describes such people, one of "our friends without an address." Just based on that one fact, would we call him "neighbor?" Would we stop to say "Hello?" Would we even greet him with a smile? After all, our society calls people like him "bums" and worse. Jesus calls them *neighbors*.

What about migrants? In this country, we have an ongoing conversation about borders, particularly our southern border. People are literally dying to get into this country. People have come from places of extreme violence and poverty, taking all kinds of risk to seek refuge in the United States, and our country's response is all-too-often to send them away, or worse, separate them here. Would we call them neighbor? Would we stop to say "Hello?" Would we greet them with a smile? After all, our society calls them "illegals" or worse. Jesus calls them *neighbors*.

What about people protesting lately? We are having a renewed conversation about issues of racial justice. People are going into the streets and often blocking traffic and doing other acts of civil disobedience. Would we call them neighbor? Would we stop to say "Hello?" Would we greet them with a smile? After all, our society calls them "agitators" or worse. Jesus calls them *neighbors*.

All of those folks are people who our society has a debate about calling neighbor. Many of us have no problem at all loving those folks as neighbors, and some are not so sure. Here's where it gets harder, though. To understand Jesus' parable, to find one who is more of a parallel to the Samaritan in Jesus' story, we've got to dig deeper.

Can we think of the people who robbed and beat Todd Ledbetter to death as neighbor? Can we think of those who prey on migrants, those who have killed people crossing the border, as neighbor? Can we think of the police officer who knelt on George Floyd's neck until he was dead as neighbor?

That is the radical mercy that Jesus is calling us to. And that is the impossible command that we face. In a different story, Jesus shared another impossible command. His disciples replied, "Then *who* can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but with

God all things are possible.” Or, as *The Message* paraphrase has it, the disciples ask “Then who has any chance at all?” Jesus replied, “No chance at all if you think you can pull it off yourself. Every chance in the world if you trust God to do it.” We don’t have any chance on our own, but with God, all things are possible. With God, we turn from hate to love. As Dr. King preached, “Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” And so we love. We don’t love actions and words of injustice and harm to others, we don’t condone such actions, but we love individuals with the goal of loving them into better and better versions of themselves. “Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

This is not to excuse the actions of those who have harmed others. Justice for those who have been harmed and for those who *have* harmed is part of love. Cornel West reminds us “justice is what love looks like in public.” Part of our love for neighbor is to stand up *with* them when they are experiencing injustice, and to stand up *to* them when they are committing injustice. Our love for neighbor is good for all of us. If it is not, it is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Back to the expert in the law. He asked the wrong question to begin with. He asked, “What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?” The verb is in a tense in Greek which suggests a *single action*. The expert in the law wants something he can put on his to-do list, some simple thing he must do, check it off his list, and then eternal life is all his. Jesus’ response shows that it’s not so simple. Life lived Jesus’ way is not something you can check off your to-do list. Jesus calls us to a way of living. I love that the early Christians called themselves “Followers of The Way.” A way of living – The Way of living – is something we are, rather than simply something we do. It affects *every thing* we do.

In the end of the parable, Jesus asks the expert in the law another question. His question is not a parallel for the original question asked of him, though it might seem so at first glance. The man asked “who is my neighbor” and then Jesus asks a question that is not that well rendered in most translations. The NRSV, which we read, says Jesus asked “Which of these three...was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” *The Message* paraphrase gets it more accurately: “Which of the three became a neighbor to the man attacked by robbers?” Hear the difference? Not which *was* a neighbor, but which *became* a neighbor? I think the difference there is that the Samaritan actively *became* a neighbor to a stranger, a stranger who he was told he was supposed to hate. Until that chance encounter, he was not a neighbor to this man. In the act of recognizing this man’s humanity, of helping him, of putting his needs before his own, the Samaritan *became* a neighbor to the man.

And so we have a choice, in all of our actions with others, to *become* a neighbor. It’s not a fixed state of being. We aren’t automatically neighbors to everyone, but we have the ability to become a neighbor.

Our church’s raindrop offering is one such chance. Over this month, we will learn more about the ministry of *Frontera de Cristo*, and I pray that you will take the opportunity to become a neighbor to those who need us. Learn more in the newsletter, from the video we will share next

week, from their website, and then join your drops of rain with those of others as we become neighbors to those on the border.

Then, become a neighbor to those you encounter as you go about your days. Cross the boundaries that our world has erected between us, reach beyond prejudice and bias, and defy those who say we are to hate those not like us. We are called to go beyond just welcoming the stranger – that’s a starting point only. We are called to become neighbors. Jesus said “Go and do likewise.” With God’s grace, strength, and guidance, may we do so, sharing the love of God with all we encounter, loving them with all of our heart, all our soul, all our strength, and all our mind. In the name of God the creator, redeemer, and sustainer. Amen.