
Gospel: 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."

998 episodes of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood all began this way. Mr. Rogers entered the television studio house singing "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" He hung his coat in the closet, put on a cardigan zipper sweater, and removed his dress shoes and put on a pair of blue sneakers.

Fred Rogers, an ordained Presbyterian minister, wrote the song "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" in an effort to teach young children how to be good neighbors. With the events happening in our world, and especially in Floyd County, KY, and Highland Park, IL, and elsewhere in the United States just in the last week or so, learning how to be a good neighbor is a lesson we still need to learn.

In the gospel I just shared, Jesus tells a story, a parable, to teach his hearers, including us, how to be good neighbors.

While I don't have any proof to back this up, I'd bet that this story...this parable of the Good Samaritan...is the best known of Jesus' teachings. Even people who have never opened a Bible, are familiar with this parable.

One of the difficulties with a story that is so familiar is that we don't think we can learn anything from it. It's easy to tune out the details when we already know what happens. Can we learn anything new from this familiar story?

The parable is very straightforward. A man is traveling on a dangerous road when he's attacked by thieves, robbed, and left for dead. Two people come by who we believe should care for the man, but don't. Then one comes who shouldn't care, but does. Clean and simple. God wants us to care for our neighbor. You can't argue with that.

But I think one of the problems that is exposed through this parable isn't just that the priest and the Levite don't care for their neighbor. It's that they don't see the man as their neighbor. They don't see the man in the ditch as their neighbor, but instead as a burden, as something that will delay them from accomplishing whatever task or duty that has put them on the road in the first place.

If we are honest, just like the priest and honest, we don't always see those in need as our neighbors either. In fact, if we're totally honest, we, too, sometimes see those in need as a burden – as an obstacle to accomplishing whatever we've set out to do. We live busy lives. There's not enough time in the day or days in the week to do all that we want or need to do. Just a couple of days ago I sent an email in which I apologized for not getting back to the person sooner, but explained some of the things that I had been busy with. The person emailed back and said, "Pastor, we understand busy." And we do. We struggle with having enough time for ourselves let alone for those in need.

I think that's one of the reasons our synod youth mission trip, which happened just the last week of June, is so important. Because just as adult lives are busy, kids' lives are busy too. Between school and athletics and music and dance and church and a host of other activities, kids are often busier than anyone. The mission trip offers a week away from their usual schedule, a week away from all that usually keeps them busy, and a very focused and intention time to see, to meet, to get to know, to serve those in need in the community we visit.

While we were in Louisville, our young people from across Indiana and Kentucky served in a variety of places. They served at Habitat for Humanity, Feed Louisville, Louisville Metro Parks, Dress for Success, Spark Hope, several memory care units, and Hope Buss.

One of the places our young people served this past week was Hope Bus. Nanny Crawley is a 28 year old, African American woman who has lived her whole life in Louisville. When Brianna Taylor was murdered and there were demonstrations and protests in the streets, Nanny was heartbroken. She was heartbroken because Brianna Taylor's life was cut short. But she was also heartbroken because the city she loved was being torn apart. She didn't know what to do. She felt something good had to come out of this tragedy. She talked with her pastor at Shawnee Presbyterian Church and her pastor didn't really have any answers. In fact, the pastor mentioned more problems, specifically the people who depended on their food pantry who were afraid to come to get their food because of the demonstrations and protests.

Nanny thought and prayed. She believed Jesus had appointed and sent her. She went downtown to the boarded up stores and restaurants and she asked if she could have the sheets of particleboard that they had put up over their windows once they took them down. Everyone she asked agreed. They didn't have any plans for them. Nanny knew that there was a Presbyterian church in Louisville that was closing that had a bus. She asked if she could have the bus. She gathered some people, they gutted the bus and used the particle board, to make shelves, to create a mobile food pantry. Now, every week day, Nanny fills the entire bus with donated food and drives the bus into low-income neighborhoods where there are high numbers of senior citizens who find it hard to get to a food pantry and some come to her Hope Bus and pick out food and she delivers to others. This 28 year old woman does this on her own every day. It's an amazing story, an amazing ministry, and she is an amazing apostle.

The time away for a mission trip helps us step out of our usual schedule and routine and see those who are in need around us. It also helps sharpen our focus so that when we return we are able to see our neighbors, not as a burden, but as people who are like us, who are created in the image of God. It helps us know that God often shows up where we least expect God to be. God comes for all. God's mercy, God's grace, and God's redemption are for everyone.

That's part of what this parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us. The injured man in Jesus' parable was beaten and lying half naked and half dead by the side of the road. But there are people who are beaten down by the trials of life who we don't even notice. Wherever we are, there are people who have been beaten down by money troubles, by relationship troubles, by illness and disease, by depression, by loneliness. They might not be bleeding, but they have been beaten down nonetheless. Jesus' words in this parable call us to see those in need and respond in the ways we can, with Jesus' help.

I think there is another thing that this parable teaches us. A professor from Luther Seminary got me thinking in this way. At the end of the parable the lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?" We would expect Jesus to say whoever is in need is your neighbor. After all, that's what we think the parable is about.

But Jesus says something different than that, right at the end. He doesn't ask who was the Samaritan's neighbor, but instead asks, "who acted like a neighbor?" The answer, of course, is obvious to everyone. It is the Samaritan who acted like a neighbor. The Samaritan went out of his way to help another. That changes things a bit. Suddenly the neighbor isn't simply the one in need, but also the one who provides for our need, the one who takes care of us.

That raises an interesting – and sometimes even uncomfortable – question: who has been our neighbor by caring for us? This is uncomfortable for us because we don't want to need help. We want to be independent, to not need anything from anyone. I know when I broke both of my arms, I went to great lengths to struggle and make due and didn't ask for help until I knew there was no way I could do it on my own. Part of it was probably my not wanting to be a burden on anyone else. Some of it was pride. Some of it was probably a little stubbornness. Whatever the reason, many of us don't want to show our needs to others and we have a hard time receiving a compliment let alone help.

But in the parable of the Good Samaritan it seems that according to Jesus, being a neighbor involves not only giving help but also being willing to receive it, even from those we don't normally see as being like us. Jesus' call isn't only to imagine those we should be helping, but those who might help us...if we gave them the chance.

God has created each and every one of us in God's own image. Every person has value and worth because they are a unique creation made by God. Jesus died and rose to new life for us. Jesus tells us that when we care for others, we care for him.

So we are left with the question: Can we learn anything new from this familiar story?

We'll know the answer to that question when we have the opportunity to show mercy, care, and love for another.

We'll know the answer to that question when we have the opportunity to receive mercy, care, and love from someone else.

We'll know the answer to that question when we can ask, "Won't you be my neighbor?" Amen.