

Neighbor: From Who to How

5 Pentecost C

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Gospel: Luke 10:25-37

Jesus is challenged to explain what is involved in obeying the greatest commandment. He tells a parable rich in surprises: those expected to show pity display hard hearts while the lowly give & receive unexpected & lavish mercy.

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

Overview - Who Are You?

Who do you identify with in the parable? This is part of what makes parables so powerful. Some days we read the story through the eyes of the priest or the Levite. Some days we feel like the Samaritan. & then there are those days when we are the man in the ditch. Some days you are the windshield & some days you are the bug, as the saying goes. It is easy to miss the shocking nature of this parable if we start to think that this story only teaches us to imitate the Samaritan. The parable says so much more about God, our relationship to God, & the lengths to which God will go to reach out to us. Through the image of the Samaritan, Jesus lifts up a surprising

rescuer as an image of the God who relentlessly cares for those in need. Could it be that we are meant to identify not with the Samaritan or even the lawyer to whom Jesus speaks the parable, but rather with the man who is hopeless & left for dead? Could it be that Christ is the good Samaritan who embraces us with the tender compassion of God? All of the sudden the parable is turned on its head. Jesus is not just giving us a comfortable morality tale reminding us to be nice, helpful, generous people. Instead Jesus is proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. God's grace comes to us through the cross. God's grace comes to us even—and especially—when we are at our worst, when we struggle in the depths & cry out for help. Even when we cannot or will not cry out, mercy & grace come into our lives through Jesus. So whether you are on the road or in the ditch, Jesus even now is coming for you.

Illustration

In today's gospel, Luke tells us that the Samaritan uses wine as an antiseptic, a common practice in the ancient world. Wine is approximately 11 percent alcohol (sometimes more in the ancient world), making it an effective wound disinfectant. Wine is not only festive & joyful, but it also, literally, heals. In the eucharist we say that it does the same: the blood of Christ cleans out old wounds, expunges old hurts, & begins our process of healing.

Worship Service Element

If you do not do so already, you may wish to consider inviting members of the assembly, especially children, to present the bread & wine at the offering. It is of great theological importance that the elements used in the eucharist actually come from the people. A glass decanter or some other transparent vessel for the wine today will underscore that this wine is offered for the healing of those present (see the discussion in the previous idea). It is undoubtedly a miracle that the wine is joined to the blood of Christ Jesus, but it is also a miracle of creation that God has transformed sun, soil, & water into grapes to produce the wine to begin with. There are lots of miracles in wine; put them on display by making the wine visible to the assembly.

Experiential Idea

Today's gospel reading provides an opportunity for theological reflection on relationships between & among neighbors. You might invite worshipers to go out into the neighborhood immediately surrounding your church building & ask people they

don't know what they know about your community of faith. Nothing? Something? What do they say? How do your neighbors perceive your parish, & what might that suggest about how your congregation can better engage with its neighbors? If you are serious about engaging with your neighbors, you might wish to begin with how they view you.

Ritual

Oil has long been an important part of the liturgy in both Jewish & Christian practice. In a Christian context, the healing of oil (chrism) is intimately tied to baptism, & oil has traditionally been stored in proximity to the baptismal font, sometimes in a special cabinet. Today you may wish to offer anointing with oil (on the hands or the forehead) of worshipers as they return from communion. Be sure that you train some volunteers to do this & that they understand why they are doing it. The book of James calls, as well, for the elders of the church to anoint with oil for the purpose of healing (5:14-15).

Children

Similarly (& in reference to the idea above regarding anointing), you might consider offering an opportunity in your children's program where children are invited to mix the oil that will be used to anoint the sick. Olive oil will work well for this, but also offer children a variety of sweet-smelling oils to mix with it so that it may have a fragrant & beautiful scent. Speak clearly with them about the meaning of the oil: Why should it smell lovely? How can a community blend its own fragrant oil, a reflection of its own charisms? If your synod holds a chrism mass each year, might you coordinate with your bishop & your children to provide this fragrant oil?

Theological Reflection

In today's gospel, Jesus gives the lawyer an ordering of the commandments: love God *first* (Deut. 6:5), love neighbor *second* (Lev. 19:18). Sometimes preachers focus on the second of these (love of neighbor) as an impetus for social justice that while difficult, is often presented as "achievable." While this is important, the order of the commandments fits well with Lutheran theology that it is *faith* (love of God) that is the most important thing. What does it mean to "love God?" Is it simple assent to creedal beliefs? Is it theology? How does one "love" the God who—in fact—*needs* no love, but instead *desires* it? This question is harder than one might think; sit with it a while.

Theological Reflection

The elevation between Jerusalem & Jericho is—actually—*downward*. Jerusalem is about 2,500 feet above sea level, & Jericho is some 700 feet below it (Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991], p. 173). This should not be lost on preachers: lots of things are going in a downward spiral, both literally & figuratively. If the beaten man is imagined to be Jesus, the good news might be that this elevation difference is, perhaps, a reflection of the incarnation: God condescending *into the world*. Remember: this *must* be a parable about how *God* is the good neighbor *first*, & how we emulate that *second*.

Current Event

The priest & the Levite who pass by the man were restricted from touching ritually impure people. For the last two years, we too have been restricted from touching people because of potential threats to our own health. Would we stop to care for the one on the side of the road if they had COVID? Fear can—without doubt—drive the ability (or refusal) to care. How do we navigate this in both this story & in a pandemic? Are we so different from the priest & the Levite, & if we're not, how do we *still* care for our neighbor?

Let the Children Come

Our definition of “neighbor” has perhaps for too long been far too narrow. “Neighbor” mostly means those who look like us, believe as we do, & live close by. Perhaps this narrow definition is beginning to crack open. Children especially may realize that the neighbor in today’s parable of the good Samaritan is not simply the person next door. Explore with the children who our neighbors are, then explore what it could look like to love these neighbors. Jesus’ story about the person who was hurt & the person who was merciful in spite of differences illustrates an expansive, borderless, selfless kind of love that reaches across boundaries for the good of the other. This kind of love is not reserved solely for our family & friends but is also offered beyond that narrow circle to those who are vulnerable & alienated. No one is beyond this far-reaching love.

Connections with Creation

“Who is my neighbor?” From the Samaritan’s perspective, the only qualification for neighbor-ness was the suffering & need of the beaten man. All other lines, walls,

hierarchies, & divisions fell away. From a creation perspective, we can think expansively about our neighbors beyond the merely human. Are animals our neighbors? How about mountains? Ecosystems? Consider making a “map” of the other-than-human neighbors around your church. Offer a children’s sermon series about the other-than-human “neighbors” that share your church’s space such as trees, flowers, insects, birds, & animals. Consider the justice aspects of this text. Are there streams suffering from pollution like a beaten man on the side of the road? Are there nearby zip codes suffering from toxic brownfields or poor air quality? How might your congregation be a neighbor & care for those who are suffering?

[Luke 10:25-37](#)

Mark (12:28-34) & Matthew (22:34-40) include similar exchanges between Jesus & a Jewish authority, but Luke’s narrative skill adds the parable to illumine & modify Jesus’ answer. Luke’s gospel previously cited Samaritans as refusing to receive Christ (9:52-53), but here the representative of the hated ethnic group epitomizes the compassion of God so important to Luke. Jesus’ answer to the lawyer cites Deuteronomy 6:4 & Leviticus 19:18, yet by highlighting the Samaritan’s merciful conduct, rather than the Torah & Jewish religious status, the parable was especially welcoming to Luke’s Gentile audience. Jericho is sixteen miles northeast of Jerusalem & “down” below sea level.

[Luke 10:25-37](#)

Our baptism has brought us into a community of mercy, those who willingly help all those in need. Loving those in need, messy & inconvenient though it may be, is the Christian way to love the Lord our God.

Images in the Readings

Contemporary English retains many phrases that echo the King James translation of the Bible; one of the most commonly used is “a **good Samaritan.**” Perhaps the fact that the story is so well-known has encouraged preachers to turn the parable into an allegory that has numerous meanings. In one Christocentric interpretation, the good Samaritan is Christ, whose crucifixion has placed him outside the law, & yet who personifies mercy. If the Good Samaritan is an image of Christ, we are the innkeepers, who are to care for the needy until Christ returns. July 11 is the commemoration of Benedict of Nursia, the sixth-century monk renowned for the inspiration that undergirds

Benedictine religious communities. Part of Benedictine spirituality is the dictum that all visitors are welcomed as if they are Christ. Thus, every stranger is the man beaten by robbers whom we receive into our midst. Much of our culture maintains the traditional expectation that one's **neighbor** is similar to one's self, whether in ethnicity, religion, or economic status. With this understanding, a neighborhood is an area that houses similar people, & this similarity affords people psychological comfort & identity support. Yet Luke's parable beckons us to a life of counter-cultural border-crossing.

Comments from the Cloud of Witnesses

Why didn't Jesus tell the lawyer whom we are to love? Why concentrate instead on how we are to love? It seems to me that it would be so much easier if I only knew who it is I have been called to love. It would better if I could know the names of those for whom I bear such awesome responsibility, but I don't. We don't. We are called by Jesus to an expansive love, to a love without limit that is potentially there for all. No one is eliminated in advance. . . .We are to love not only the disenfranchised & alienated, the marginalized & oppressed, those needy strangers whom we read about on the front page or pass by in the subway station, but our friends, our relatives, & all those at the center of our political, social, & economic power structures. If we love like the Samaritan loved, we will be compassionate & generous to each person upon whom we stumble. [Barbara Finan, in *Homilies for the Christian People*, 499.]