

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Parables on the Way to the Cross: Loving Neighbor
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Leviticus 19:13-118; Luke 10:25-37

He is famous. His name is everywhere. It is on hospitals. It is on long-term care facilities. It is on businesses. It is on organizations that serve the poor and the hungry. It is on websites and counseling centers. It is associated with a particular set of laws. Newscasters regularly refer to him. So who is this famous man about town? He is the Good Samaritan. Yes, that's right, the Good Samaritan. There are Good Samaritan hospitals, hospital systems, retirement communities, rehabilitation clinics, organizations that serve the needs of the poor and counseling services such as Samaritan Counseling which operates in our own building. In addition there are Good Samaritan laws which protect passersby from being sued when they help someone in need. And on news broadcasts whenever someone stops to assist another person, they are called good Samaritans. What is fascinating about these associations of the Good Samaritan name is that they are made by or to people who probably don't know the Samaritan's origin story. They have no idea he is a character in a parable once told by Jesus. But just so that we are all on the same page this morning, let's return to the story and remind ourselves of the purpose of the parable.

The story begins with a religious lawyer testing Jesus as to the rules for gaining eternal life. Jesus, being Jesus, asks the lawyer about the Torah's requirements for entry. The lawyer replies correctly that it is to love God and love neighbor. Jesus agrees. But then the lawyer asks a second question, a question that was in fact always under debate in Judaism - who is my neighbor? This is when Jesus tells his parable which begins with a rather foolish man who walked the dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho by himself. This road was also known as the bloody road because of the crime and violence that occurred on it. The foolish man is robbed, beaten, and left for dead. Over the course of time a priest, going home from his annual duty at the Jerusalem Temples, passes by the man in need. Next a Levite, someone who is sort of support staff for the priests at the Jerusalem Temple, walks by the beaten man and does nothing as well. Then a foreigner, an enemy of the Jews, a Samaritan, stops, has pity on the beaten man, and then takes care of the man, both on the site of the robbery and then later at a local motel. As the story concludes, Jesus asks, which of these men was the neighbor? The answer given by the lawyer is, the one who showed mercy. Thus, the Good Samaritan passes from parable to legend and becomes the prototype for caring.

The conclusion that has been drawn over and over again from the story is the correct one, that we are to be Good Samaritans, helping those in need because everyone is our neighbor. But what if Jesus is trying to tell us more than who is our neighbor? What if this parable contains more than that simple, yet powerful lesson? I ask that because I believe that Jesus is indeed trying to teach us a second valuable lesson, which is, how does someone become our neighbor?

To understand this let's take a second look at the story and the location of the three travelers who come across the man who has been beaten. First there is the priest. He passes by the beaten man on the **other side** of the road. In other words, he does not get close enough to see who this man is or what is wrong with him. Next comes the Levite. He too passes by on the **other side** of the road and so cannot see the exact condition of the man lying just off the road. Finally, the Samaritan arrives. The language Jesus uses to describe him implies that he too is initially on the **other side** of the road, but then **"he came near."** In other words, the Samaritan **moved from the other side of the road to be close enough** to the beaten man to see his condition. It was in this near proximity that the Samaritan's pity is evoked for this man who was in need. Next, the Samaritan "went to him," meaning the Samaritan moves even closer, so close in fact that he treats the man's wounds, bandages them, places the man on a donkey, carries the man to safety, checks him into a Holiday Inn Express, gives the Clerk a credit card saying, this man's stay is on me. This is how the Samaritan made the foolish man his neighbor.

Your response might be something like, "Well, John, that's all well and good but I know that everyone is my neighbor. Why should I need to know how to make someone my neighbor?" My response would be that we usually do not cross the street. We stay on our side of the road because that is the natural human tendency. Or, to put it another way, we segregate. And let me be clear that this tendency to segregate is not just an American tendency, or a Detroit tendency, but a human tendency. After all, birds of a feather...right? Think about it, we tend to want to gravitate to people who are like us; so, we segregate according to language and ethnicity. We segregate according to wealth and class. We segregate according to race and religion. We segregate by ability and disability. And though we truly believe that everybody is our neighbor, because we are walking on one particular side of the road it becomes hard for us to make people on the other side of the road our neighbor. I would argue that this is why Jesus tells this parable, because crossing the street to care for others was as difficult in his day as it is in ours.

But this is what Jesus challenges us to do, not just to intellectually agree that everyone is our neighbor, but to cross the road. So why did the Christian cross the road? To get to the other side to make someone our neighbor. And I have to say that this is one of the gifts of Everybody's Church; we try to offer opportunities to go across the road. We have done so through our work at Alcott where we go and make a difference in children's lives. We have done so through our Rejoicing Spirits community and our work with Angels' Place homes. Many of you who have been delivering food to families in Pontiac are crossing the road because you have come to know the families you are assisting. We crossed the road with our hosting of the South Oakland Shelter, where some of you befriended those who stayed as our guests. I believe we have done this in our work in Kenya, where we drew near, saw, and worked side by side with our brothers and sisters there to build a church and a school. And many of you are crossing the road in ways the rest of us are not even aware. The challenge for us is to keep at it. It is to remember that we are not called by God to walk on the far side of the road, but to cross over, to listen, to see, to love and to serve. So the question I would like each of you to ask yourselves this week is this, how am I crossing the road in order to make someone my neighbor?