

First Presbyterian Church  
Life Lessons from Luke: Loving  
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Leviticus 19:9-17; Luke 10:25-37

Most of us know the story. We have heard multiple sermons on the tale. The characters are familiar. It begins with Jesus being asked about the greatest commandment. Jesus turns the tables on the questioner, but ultimately, they both agree that the greatest commandments are to love God and neighbor. At that point the questioner, a legal expert, asks a follow-up question. Who is my neighbor? At that point Jesus tells a story. There is a man going from Jerusalem to Jericho, a very dangerous journey. He is beaten by robbers and left for dead. Two of his fellow countrymen walk by and ignore him, moving to the other side of the road. One of these men was a priest and the other a Levite, meaning someone who worked at the Temple alongside the priests. Finally, a Samaritan comes along and helps the man. Then Jesus asks the legal expert, who it was in the story who was a real neighbor. The legal expert says, "The one who showed him mercy." Or, in other words, it was the Samaritan who was the neighbor, implying that even enemies are our neighbors. But what if...what if the legal expert would have asked a different question? What story would Jesus have told then?

I ask because there is a second question that goes unasked in this conversation and that question is, what does it mean to be a neighbor? I would posit that this is in fact a much more complicated question. It is more complicated because life is complicated, and every human interaction is different from the one before. It is easy to say, "Hey everyone, even my enemies are my neighbors," pat myself on the back, and go home and have a mint-julep on the porch, knowing that I get Jesus' point. It is a much more difficult thing to say, well, here is how I treat them as neighbors. Even so, back to my questions of what it means to be a neighbor and what sort of story Jesus would tell attempting to illustrate what being a neighbor looks like. What I would like to offer for your consideration this morning is a framework for answering the first question, what does it mean to be a neighbor, and then suggest that Jesus might have told the same story in illustrating what being a neighbor looks like. I will do both these things by weaving together one idea and three Biblical stories. The one idea is that to love neighbor is to love like God loves. The three Biblical stories are the Exodus story, our passage from Leviticus, and the Good Samaritan story. Ready? Here we go.

First, loving like God means providing. The Exodus story is a powerful reminder that it is God who provides for God's people. God provided them with water from a rock. God provided them with manna and quail to eat. God provided them with clothes that never wore out. The concept of God as provider is a central theme in the Exodus account. We can see this same sense of providing for neighbor in the Leviticus text. Farmers are not to reap all their grain but are to provide some for the poor and landless. Vintners are not to harvest all the grapes but are to leave some for those who have none, in essence providing the thirsty with wine. Both actions mirror God's provision in the wilderness where God's people were aliens and had no access to the necessities of life. Finally, the concept of providing is woven throughout the Samaritan story. First the Samaritan provides for the man's physical needs with bandages, oil, and wine. Then the Samaritan provided for the man's food and lodging. If we are to love like God loves then, we need to ask ourselves how are we providing for those who are our neighbors? Again, providing can be accomplished in a wide variety of ways. The central question is, how am I providing for at least some of my neighbors?

Second, loving like God means protecting. We return to the wilderness and the vulnerability of the Hebrew people as they left Egypt. Though they may have had some weapons with them...the story is not clear...they would have been no match for the Egyptian army, which was one of the most powerful armies of that day and age. The odds were not good that the Hebrews would escape. Yet somehow, they did. And they did because God protected them. God protected them by parting the seas. God protected them by allowing them to cross the sea on dry land. God did so by inundating the pursuing Egyptian army in the waters of the sea. It was God's protection that saved the people. While the idea of protection is not quite as clear in the Leviticus passage, it is there. God's people are to protect their neighbors from theft, falsehood, being defrauded, from wage theft; or being harmed because of stumbling blocks, or injustice, slander, and oppression. Protection is also part of the Samaritan story. The Samaritan protected the man by taking him to a motel, paying his rent, and ensuring his fair treatment, thus protecting the man from further harm and starvation. If we are to love like God loves, the question is how are we working to protect the vulnerable around us? Again, there are multiple ways to protect our neighbors. The central question is, how am I protecting the poor and the alien?

Third, and finally, loving like God means forgiving. I realize that this may seem like a stretch on all fronts, yet I believe that forgiveness stands at the heart of each of these scriptures. We begin again with the Exodus. After God protected the people by freeing them from Pharaoh's army; after God had provided for the people with water and food, the people chose to create and worship a golden calf, rather than God who had saved them. God should have left them in the desert, but God doesn't. God forgives them and continues with them, even if God made the journey a bit longer than originally intended. The passage from Leviticus reminds the people of God that they are not to hate, take vengeance, or bear a grudge. These injunctions imply that someone has been harmed and that there is someone in the community who has committed the harm. The only way to remain as neighbors is to forgive. Finally, we come to the Samaritan story. Where is the forgiveness here? It is the story itself. The Samaritans hated the Jews because the Jews had conquered them, oppressed them, and destroyed their Temple. The very fact that Jesus would have a Samaritan helping a Jew was a demonstration of the extent of the forgiveness the Samaritan offered to one who might be his enemy. If we are to love like God, the question is, how are we offering forgiveness to those who have harmed us? Again, as before, there are multiple ways and opportunities for offering forgiveness to our neighbors. The central question is, how am I offering forgiveness to those near and far?

Over the past few days, weeks, and years we have found ourselves surrounded by the news of mass shootings, political disputes, war in Ukraine, drought in the west, inflation, and hunger around the world. The temptation is to withdraw, build walls, and care only about ourselves. The temptation is to set aside our call to love our neighbors. Yet, I believe that these are the moments when we need to be even more engaged in loving those near at hand and those far away. I believe this not only because it is the second great commandment, but because none of us ever know what the fruits of such love might be. The love we offer just might change someone's heart and life and send them in a different direction. My challenge this morning is for all of us to ask ourselves how are we loving like God in loving our neighbors?