

“Being Neighborly”

The Gospel Lesson for today is read from Luke 10:25-37

Hear the words from the disciple, Luke:

Read Luke 10:25-37

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

“Thanks be to God”

Let us pray:

God of justice, your word is light and truth.

Let your face shine on us to restore us,

that we may walk in your way,

seeking justice and doing good. Amen.

Intro:

NT and Jewish Studies professor Amy-Jill Levine argues in her 2015 book, *The Short Stories of Jesus*, that religion is meant "to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable." I believe this to be true as I wrote my Citadel senior thesis in psychology on the subject of religiosity and the affects it had on the wellbeing of terminally ill patients. My study showed that those who prayed and were religious were more likely to get better from their illness rather than those who did not pray or held a belief. Religion is meant "to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable." Amy-Jill Levine also suggests that we would do well to think of the parables of Jesus as doing this affliction: “If we hear a parable and think, 'I really like that' or, worse, fail to take on any confrontation (which is what Jesus’s parables do – they confront us and challenge us), then we are not listening well enough.”

The Gospel reading for this morning — the parable of the Good Samaritan — presents a particular dangerous affliction for me. The danger and difficulty for me (and I assume, for many

“Being Neighborly”

of us) is that Jesus's parables are so familiar and beloved that I don't tend to read them as “afflictions.” We say to ourselves, “I've heard these “short stories” a zillion times,

I believe I know them inside out and backwards,

and therein lies the great dangerous problem. They don't challenge me. I read, I nod, and I walk away, unafflicted and unchanged.” Kind of like the way I paid no attention whatsoever to the flight attendant who was reviewing the safety and emergency procedures before the plane took off for my honeymoon. They begin their routine drill and I tune out, because I've heard it all before. Nothing new for me to learn.

Same goes for this parable. We know this story: A man on a journey is robbed and left for dead, a priest and a Levite pass him by (two seemingly upstanding pillars in society), and a Samaritan (the lowest of the low within Jewish and Roman society) stops and helps. The Samaritan, showing mercy, exemplifies the same neighborliness I am called to practice as a Christian. Jesus's lesson? Be like the Samaritan. Be a nice person. Go and do what he did.

Okay. Got it. (Easier said than done, but okay, pretty straight forward.) But wait, is that all? Doesn't Jesus always have a deeper meaning when he tells a parable?

To answer that question we then have to ask, what would Jesus's original audience have made of this parable? Would they have agreed with it? Surely there's nothing wrong with interpreting the Good Samaritan parable as a “go and do likewise” story. After all, we are called to be imitators of Christ. To assist others, to show concern, and to offer compassionate care to those in need or trouble. The Good Samaritan offers us a beautiful example to follow, and we would do well to pay attention.

But again — is that all? Is that all the “afflicting” this story has for us? Or did Jesus have something more challenging in mind?

“Being Neighborly”

Perhaps it will help to place the story in its fuller context. As Luke tells it, a lawyer approaches Jesus with a million dollar question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" I know that scholars often give the lawyer a bad rap for “testing” Jesus, but you have to give the lawyer props here in the boldness of his question. If it’s a genuine one, it means the lawyer wants to live fully and intentionally. He doesn’t want to waste his life. He doesn’t want to mess around in the shallow end of the pool he wants to deep-sea dive with his remaining years on earth. He says, "show me the good stuff, Jesus. Show me the path to eternal life."

But Jesus is too savvy a teacher to answer the question directly, so he turns it back on his would-be student: "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" The lawyer (no fool himself) gives Jesus a concise, A+ answer: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus congratulates the lawyer on his doctrinal precision: "You have given the right answer," and encourages him to take the essential next step: "Do this, and you will live." But the lawyer — annoyed, perhaps, that Jesus isn’t more impressed by his Torah textbook smarts — asks for further clarification. "Who is my neighbor?"

Maybe, I wonder if what the lawyer really means is, "Who is not my neighbor?" As in: how much love are we talking here, Jesus? Can you be specific? Where should I draw the line? Outside my front door? At the edges of my neighborhood? Along the religious and cultural boundaries I was raised with to keep me pure and holy? I mean, there are lines, aren’t there? There must be lines. We can’t be neighbors with everyone

I assume the lawyer would have loved to argue with Jesus the finer points of being a responsible and righteous neighbor. What better way to put off getting his hands dirty than to

“Being Neighborly”

talk about what it may look like for hours? But Jesus doesn't take the bait. Instead he tells a story. A story whose main character we know so well, we've named hospitals, nursing homes, relief agencies, and charitable organizations after him. In the U.S, he even has a law coined in his honor: any modern-day "good samaritan" who stops to help a stranger along the road enjoys certain legal protections for their trouble. Even the hit television show *Seinfeld* ended its series finale with mixed reviews and controversy poking fun at the law, having the main characters convicted of being “bad samaritans.”

But as Jesus tells the story, a man is walking down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho when he's attacked by bandits. They rob, beat, strip, and leave him for dead. Soon afterwards, a priest comes by. Seeing the wounded man, he passes by on the other side of the road. A short while later, a Levite does likewise. But then a Samaritan comes along. Seeing the stranded victim, he draws close, and feels great pity. Using whatever makeshift supplies he has on hand, he bandages the man's wounds, anoints them with oil and wine, carries him to the nearest inn on his own animal, pays the innkeeper for the victim's further care, and promises to return in a few days' time to settle any outstanding bills.

"So," Jesus asks the lawyer at the conclusion of the story. "Which of the three was a neighbor to the man who was robbed?" "The one who showed him mercy," the lawyer replies. "Go and do likewise," Jesus says again. "Do this and you will live."

But hold on, this second question, the one that prompted Jesus to tell the parable, was not a DO question. It was a BE question. The lawyer wanted to know whom Jesus considered to BE his “neighbor.” It was in response to this second question that Jesus told the parable about the Good Samaritan. And Jesus' meaning is clear. He told the lawyer that he must BE a neighbor to those he considered ritually unclean, socially unacceptable, and morally corrupt.

“Being Neighborly”

To inherit eternal life, Jesus says, we must be in loving relationship with all of God’s children, especially those with whom we disagree, would judge as sinful, or even despise. As United Methodists, this is the “parable” that speaks to the second part of our mission statement. By living in this way, we participate in God’s transformation of the world.

I think that the problem many of us have is the same problem that the lawyer had. We think that the way to inherit eternal life is to DO something: say the right words, believe the right things, have the right kind of baptism, give the right amount of money, join the right church, live the right way, and do the right things in this life. In this way of thinking, we have complete control of our eternal destiny. We simply earn our way to eternal life by doing the right things.

But Jesus says that the way to find eternal life is not by doing something, but by BEING something. Specifically, it is by being the kind of person the Good Samaritan was. Eternal life is discovered by living in the way of Christ for the transformation of the world.

What kind of person was the Samaritan? He was a person who, first and foremost, was neither frightened nor apathetic when he happened upon a situation of injustice in his community.

But what if Jesus's parable goes deeper? What if Jesus’s parable is more than a good-example-to-follow story? More than a go and do likewise story? More than a BE story? What if it's a reversal story? A story intended to upset our categories of good and bad? If we too easily and comfortably identify with the Good Samaritan in this parable, we're missing the point. Maybe the whole point of the Samaritan is that he is not us.

By the time Jesus told this story in first century Palestine, the disgust between the Jews and the Samaritans was ancient, entrenched, and bitter. The two groups disagreed about everything that mattered: how to honor God, how to interpret the Scriptures, and how and where

“Being Neighborly”

to worship. They practiced their faith in separate temples, read different versions of the Torah, and avoided social contact with each other whenever possible. Truth be told, they hated each other's guts. Though we're inclined to love the Good Samaritan, Jesus's choice to make him “good,” to make him of all people the hero of the story, was nothing less than shocking to his original listeners' ears.

To put this in more contemporary language, the Samaritan was the Other. The Outcast. The alien. The heretic. The object of fear, condescension, disgust, and judgment.

Is there anything we can do in our 21st century lives to recover the feeling of disgust at the heart of this parable? Because at its heart is disgust for the Other. Think about it this way: Who is the last person on earth you'd ever want to deem "the good guy?" The last person you'd ever want to ask for a favor — much less owe your life? Whom do you secretly hope to convert, fix, impress, control, or save — but never, ever need?

May I throw out some possibilities? A progressive Democrat is robbed, and a far-right Republican saves her life. A rich man is robbed, and a poor homeless man saves his life. A transgender woman is robbed, and an anti-LGBTQ activist saves her life. A border patrol agent is robbed, and an undocumented immigrant saves his life. An outspoken atheist is robbed, and a Bible-thumping Christian saves his life.

I don't mean for a moment to trivialize the real and consequential differences that divide us politically, religiously, economically, or ideologically. I dare not do that — not when those differences are even today costing people their lives. But the hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans in Jesus's day was not theoretical; it was embodied and real. The differences between them were not easily negotiated; each was fully convinced that the other was wrong.

“Being Neighborly”

So what Jesus did when he deemed the Samaritan "good" was radical and risky; it stunned his Jewish listeners. He was asking them to dream of a different kind of kingdom. He was inviting them to consider the possibility that a person might add up to more than the sum of her political, racial, cultural, and economic identities. He was calling them to put aside the history they knew, and the prejudices they nursed. He was asking them to leave room for divine and world-altering surprises.

What does it mean to be afflicted by this story? It means locating ourselves, not in the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan, but in the wounded man, dying on the road. Notice that he is the only character in the story not defined by profession, social class, or religious belief. He has no identity at all except naked need. Maybe we have to occupy his place in the story first — maybe we have to become the broken one, grateful to anyone at all who will show us mercy — before we can feel the unbounded compassion of the Good Samaritan. Why? Because all loyalties fall away on the broken road. All divisions of "us" and "them" disappear out of necessity. When you're lying bloody in a ditch, what matters is not whose help you'd prefer, whose way of practicing Christianity you like best, whose politics you agree with. What matters is whether or not anyone will stop to show you mercy before you die.

If it hasn't happened yet — your encounter on that dark road — it will. Somehow, someday, somewhere, it will. In a hospital room? At a graveside? After a marriage fails? When a cherished job goes bust? After the storm, the betrayal, the war, the injury, the diagnosis? Somehow, someday, somewhere. In every single one of our lives, it will happen. When it does, it won't be your theology that saves you. It won't be your cherished affiliations that matter. All that will matter is how quickly you swallow your pride and grab hold of that hand you hoped never to touch. How readily you'll agree to receive help from the enemy you fear.

“Being Neighborly”

"Who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked. Your neighbor is the one who disgusts you with compassion, Jesus answered. Your neighbor is the one who overturns all your fixed categories and shocks you with a fresh face of God. Your neighbor is the one who mercifully steps over the ancient, bloodied line separating "us" from "them," and teaches you the real meaning of "Good." And wasn't Jesus the ultimate Neighbor for us then and isn't Jesus the pinnacle Neighbor to us now?

What shall we do then to inherit eternal life? Do this. BE this. Suffer the vulnerable-making burden of doing and being this. Recognize yourself in Jesus, the desperate victim, and the loving Savior. Allow the one you hate the most to snatch you back from death, and Be the one who loves the loathsome. Do this, be this and you will live.

Let us pray:

Almighty God,
 you give the holy law to your people
 so that it will always be near us and our children.
 Through our Lord Jesus who has fulfilled the law in every way,
 grant that we may love you with heart, soul, strength, and mind,
 and our neighbor as ourselves. And as you said to us then you still say to us now "do these things
 and we will have eternal life", Amen

Prayers of the People:

Friends in Christ,
 God invites us to hold the needs of our sisters and brothers
 as dear to us as our own needs.
 Loving our neighbors as ourselves,
 we offer our thanksgivings and our petitions
 on behalf of the church and the world.

When you hear the words "Lord in your mercy" everyone in response will say "Hear our prayer"
 and remain silent for a moment of prayer.

[p.495]

Lord God, friend of those in need,
 your Son Jesus has untied our burdens
 and healed our spirits.

“Being Neighborly”

We lift up the prayers of our hearts for those still burdened,
those seeking healing,
those in need within the church and the world.
you call us to love and serve you
with body, mind, and spirit
through loving your creation
and our sisters and brothers.
Open our hearts in compassion
and receive these petitions
on behalf of the needs of the church and the world. Creator God, hear our prayers
that we may love you with our whole being
and willingly share the concerns of our neighbors. Amen.