Knowing Our Neighbors
Luke 10:25-37
Rev. Brian Bill
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The story of the Good Samaritan is one of the most well-known parables of Jesus but it’s not always correctly understood. That reminds me of the boy who came home from Sunday School after learning about the Good Samaritan. He told his mother the story in great detail. He had all the facts straight and all the people in their right roles. When his mom asked, “What’s the purpose of the parable?” her son replied, “It means that when we’re in trouble, others should come to help us!” Not exactly.

The popularity of this parable in some ways works against it. It’s so well known that we think we know everything there is to know about it without knowing that we might not really know it. You know what I mean?

It’s common to just skim a story, especially when we’re pretty familiar with it. This morning we’re going to take a different angle in the hopes that we’ll encounter the parable’s purpose in a fresh and moving way.

Last week we learned that there’s a difference between a servant and a volunteer and we established that the issue is not whether we will serve but where we will serve. Today we’re going to discover that a neighbor is anyone in need that God brings in front of me.

[Scripture Reading]

[Prayer]

Putting the Text in Context

Before studying the story, let’s back up a bit and look at the text in context because a text out of context is a pretext for a proof text. Please turn in your Bibles to Luke 10:25-37. There are two basic structural divisions, each of which is prompted by a question.

1. **What must I do to inherit eternal life?** In verse 25 we read: “And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, ‘Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’” This law expert was adept at understanding the Old Testament and wanted to put Jesus to the test, hoping he could trip Him up so the people would stop listening to Him.

   Specifically, this sophisticated Scripture scholar was “heresy hunting” by attempting to discredit Jesus. Do you see the contradiction in his question? He’s wondering what he must do in order to inherit eternal life. An inheritance is not something that we work for; it’s a gift that comes from being born into a family.

As Jesus often did, He turns the question back on the person who asks it in verse 26: “He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?’”
In his book *Questioning Evangelism*, Randy Newman goes through all the gospel passages where Jesus answers a question by asking his own question. He argues that we should do the same.

For instance, if someone were to ask you, “Do you really believe everyone goes to hell except those who believe in Jesus?”, you could answer with a question like this: “Oh, do you think nobody should go to hell, then?” The individual is likely to say, “Well, maybe some do go there…like Hitler.” You could then follow-up with something like: “On what basis do you decide who goes to hell and who doesn’t?” And now you’re ready to talk about God and His holiness and why He sent His Son to earth.

Notice that with his question, Jesus led the lawyer to the authority of the Bible, which is something we should do as well. The man answers correctly by citing Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18: “So he answered and said, ‘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 ‘your neighbor as yourself.’”

In verse 28 Jesus affirms him for giving the right answer (the word is “orthos” from where we get orthodoxy, which means “correct belief”) and at the same time flips the tables to show that He’s the only authoritative expert. Jesus then adds these unsettling words: “Do this and you will live.” This is “orthopraxy,” which refers to “correct behavior.”

Jesus is saying that if you want to use the Law as leverage to get into heaven, then you better follow everything in it by always loving God every second, every hour, every day with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind from the day you are born until the day you die.

The phrase, “do this” means “to keep on doing this forever.” The word “love” is in the present tense, meaning constantly and continuously. That also includes loving your neighbor perfectly, all the time. That’s the standard that God sets. If you want to get in, then be perfect. One slip up and you’re out. This legal beagle is condemned by the very Law he quoted.

And so the first question the man asks is, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Here’s the second question…

2. **Who is my neighbor?** Jesus’ response makes the expert nervous and he’s probably regretting he ever asked the question. Instead of owning his inability to keep the law, in verse 29 the lawyer is looking for a loophole when he asks a second question: “But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”

The man now seeks to defend himself and deflect his responsibility by asking for a definition of the word “neighbor.” He’s hoping to be acquitted on a technicality in the Law.
Our lawyer tried to put Jesus on the defensive, to force Him to justify Himself. And now, suddenly and unexpectedly, it is the lawyer who is on the spot. He now scrambles to justify himself.

A bit of background is helpful here. There was a raging debate back then about whom a neighbor really was. They wanted to know who was in and who was out. The Jews typically interpreted “neighbor,” as “one who is near,” or a fellow Jew. The Pharisees tended to reject “ordinary people” while a smaller community at Qumran excluded everyone who was not part of their group. This man wants Jesus to draw a circle but it’s a lot bigger than he bargained for. He’s looking for a legal limit by making the Law require less than it does.

People do this all the time. Some rely on being a “good person” in order to get into heaven. Others know that they’re not all that good so they try to reduce God’s entrance requirements. Does that describe anyone here today? Do you really think you’re good enough to get in? Or do you think you can justify yourself by lowering God’s standards?

Jesus doesn’t directly answer the question but instead tells a simple story or parable. He doesn’t quote the Greek or offer a lengthy dissertation. Instead of arguing in the abstract, Jesus presents a concrete case. He could have leveled the lawyer but instead He gives him one more chance to see his own sinfulness.

On the surface this popular parable appears to be a simple story about being nice to our neighbors. It’s actually much deeper than that because it’s designed to show each of us how sinful and selfish we really are and that our only hope of going to heaven is by being justified by Jesus, not by doing good works. Being good is not good enough because none of us is good enough to get in.

The Story

In an effort to keep us from checking out because the story is so familiar, we’re going to view the events through the swollen eyes of the wounded man. Please follow along in your Bible or on your app beginning in Luke 10:30.

_I had just left Jerusalem and was on my way home to Jericho, which was about 17 miles away. I treasured my time of worship in the Temple but was now eager to see my family. I should tell you that the road I took was treacherous and dangerous, dropping some 4,000 feet from beginning to end._

_There were huge boulders and caves where robbers would hide out. We called it the “bloody pass” because so many who passed this way got beat up and robbed. It was like walking through a dark alley in the worst part of Chicago. I knew I shouldn’t be out there alone but I didn’t know what else to do._
As I rounded a sharp bend in the road a man jumped off a rock on to my back. Another took me out at the knees. I felt a third guy grab my head and he started slamming it onto the stony path. I tried to scream but nothing came out. They took all my money and then I felt them rip my clothes off my back.

As they got up to leave the bigger guy kicked me in the face and I felt excruciating pain as one of my teeth fell to the dirt. Another one slugged me in the stomach and I started vomiting.

I don’t know how long I laid there because I slipped in and out of consciousness. I then heard some noise and thought the robbers were coming back to finish me off. I had a difficult time focusing but I could make out a priest coming my way. Surely he would help me because he had just come from the Temple. I saw him glance at me and then look away as he moved to the opposite side of the path where he picked up his pace and vanished around a corner.

A few minutes later a Levite came upon me. He slowed down and gazed at me. I was relieved because surely this religious man would help. He seemed grossed out by my wounds and quickly scurried to the other side of the road and was gone. I thought I was a goner.

By now the sun was going down and I couldn’t get up. I was just starting to shut my eyes and drift off when I saw a blurry image of a man on a donkey. I could tell by the way he was dressed and by his features that he was a Samaritan. Initially I recoiled but I needed some help.

Our people hated people like him and he hated people like me. Our animosity went back generations to when his ancestors intermarried with pagans. My forefathers burned the temple of the Samaritans to the ground and they responded by sneaking into our temple and defiling it.

You don’t really have an exact equivalent in your culture but it would be similar to having a member of the Taliban as the one who stopped to help you. The very reason this road to Jericho was so long is because Jews used it as a detour so as not to travel through the land of the Samaritans. This was the Samaritan’s opportunity to spit on me or finish me off.

I couldn’t believe what happened next. I saw compassion in his eyes. He jumped off his donkey and came right over to see how he could help. He then took his precious wine, which served as an antiseptic and poured it on my wounds. Then he showered my sores with expensive soothing oil. He then ripped some of his clothes off and used the strips as bandages.
When the bleeding stopped he lifted me up and put me on his donkey and walked next to me for miles until we came to an inn. He stayed up all night taking care of my needs, bringing me water and trying to get me to eat something.

The next day he took out two denarii (which represented two days’ wages) and gave them to the innkeeper and urged him to look after me until he could return. That might be hard for you to grasp in your economy but that was enough money for about two weeks worth of food and lodging. He even told the motel manager to put any extra charges on his credit card and he would settle up when he came back. This was over the top but I was grateful because people who couldn’t pay their debts often had to sell themselves into slavery.

**Two Points of the Parable**

I see at least two main points of this parable. The first has application to those of us who are already born again. The second application, which gets to the main purpose of the parable, is for those who have yet to be converted.

1. **For believers.** In verses 36-37, Jesus presses home the point of the parable to the religious man: **“So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?” And he said, ‘He who showed mercy on him.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’”**

The question is not “Who is my neighbor” but rather, “Am I being neighborly to everyone, even my enemies?” The law expert put the emphasis on whether a person was worthy of love; Jesus put the emphasis on the one who does the loving. The lawyer wanted a definition and a limitation and so Jesus defined love as limitless.

A neighbor is anyone in need who God brings in front of me. To ask **“Who is my neighbor?”** is to look for a loophole by focusing on what claim others have on my time and energy and resources. To ask, **“Whose neighbor am I?”** is to focus on what I owe to the suffering people all around me. A neighbor is anyone in need that God brings in front of me.

The law-expert answered correctly when he said that the neighbor was **“the one who had mercy on him.”** Notice that he couldn’t even say the word “Samaritan.” He’s kind of like the “Fonz” on Happy Days who could never admit he was wrrrrr-on. He’s told to go and do as the Samaritan did. Not just once, but as a lifestyle of loving servanthood.

Brothers and sisters; be careful about allowing “religiosity” to become an excuse for excluding those you don’t like. The ironic thing is that the priests were to serve as public health officials and part of what Levites did was to distribute funds to the poor and needy.

Listen. The religious people in this story gave the right answers but they didn’t apply what they knew. They spent all their time worshipping and praising but didn’t work it out practically. They came from God’s presence but somehow God’s presence never got
through to them. We can sing, “You Are My King” and “I Am Free” in worship and yet walk right by hurting hearts made in the image of God.

Notice also that the priest “by chance” is going down the road when he came across a need. There’s no such thing as a coincidence with God, is there? God orchestrates our days and activities and provides opportunities for us to meet needs. Ephesians 2:10 says: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” I’m saddened when I think of how many “good works” I pass up everyday. Will you pass by when God purposely brings people across your path?

We’re to practice acts of kindness and compassion. Proverbs 21:13 says: “Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be heard.”

When the Samaritan saw the man, he “had compassion” on him. This is a very strong word in the Greek referring to the inner recesses of the stomach and bowels. It’s the idea of being deeply moved. One of the best definitions I’ve heard for compassion is this: “Your hurt in my heart.”

His emotion led to motion. Compassion must lead to action. Seeing led to sympathy, which led to service. I understand Tim Wolfe presented the ministry of Compassion International recently. What a great ministry!

Every part of the Samaritan was involved in helping – his eyes, heart, feet, hands, thoughts, time, possessions, speech and money. On top of that he crosses a cultural, racial and religious boundary. We must do the same. I was delighted to read Pastor Jeff’s notes about his recent lesson for the students that dealt with racism. If the Samaritan looked past race and helped someone different than him, then so should we, right?

Let’s go back to the lawyer’s question: “Who is my neighbor?” We must answer this way: My neighbor is anyone in need whose path I cross whose need I am able to meet. In that light you never know when you’ll run into a neighbor because you’ll find neighbors everywhere you go. John Wesley liked to say, “The world is my parish.” With this story Jesus is teaching us to say: “The world is my neighborhood.”

In a real sense God has brought the world to the Quad Cities and we’re called to be neighbors to those in need. A few weeks ago, Jim Koehler and Pastor Dan spearheaded an effort to come alongside Calvary International Revival Church in Rock Island after hearing that their building had suffered some significant damage due to all the rain this spring.

This church is comprised mostly of African refugees. I’m going to ask Pastor Dan to come and share a bit about this.

⇒ INTERVIEW WITH DAN
1. Tell us what you oversee at Edgewood.
2. How has God opened the door for Edgewood to reach out to our neighbors in need?
3. Why is it so important for each of us to live on mission for Christ in the QC?

I came across an article from Quad Cities Online in which the pastor was asked what he wished he knew how to do. I love his answer: “Help everybody.” A couple months ago, after their building suffered problems, he said this in an interview: “You don’t have to go to Africa to do mission work,” he said, “it’s in your backyard. If you can help us, God will bless you.”

I called Pastor Vitalis this week to introduce myself. This is what he said: “Your people really stepped in and helped.” Way to go, Edgewood!

Several years ago it was reported that a man was standing near a hole that had been dug as part of a large excavation. A number of workers were in the hole removing dirt when the walls collapsed around them. Rescuers began running from everywhere but the man just stood by and watched the scene with detachment. Suddenly a woman called out from a nearby house: “Jim, your brother is down there!” Instantly he stripped off his coat and began digging frantically. Why? His brother was in mortal danger and he needed help.

We too must see everyone we meet as someone with needs that we can help meet. There are three groups presented in this parable. Which one represents you?

- **The robbers:** “What’s yours is mine and if I want it, I’ll take it from you.” They were the takers.
- **The religious:** “What’s mine is mine and if you need it, you can’t have it.” They were the talkers.
- **The redeemed:** “What’s mine is yours and if you need it, I will give it to you.” The redeemed are the touchers.

Another direct application of this parable involves reaching out to our literal neighbors. Check out this editorial from the June 18, 2013 issue of the Dispatch entitled “Whatever Happened to Being a Good Neighbor?”

Where did all the neighbors go? Unfortunately, for most of us, the “neighbor” concept seems to have faded away. Yes, we reside near each other, but the proximity has no meaning, as we have gotten used to a life of self-imposed isolation. We reside indoors, with the doors closed, leave through our garages, come back to our homes, close our garages and repeat it day by day without interacting with the persons living a few feet away.

I recently read a book called, **The Art of Neighboring** with this subtitle: “Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door.” Here’s what I wrote down after reading it: “Many of us have hundreds of Facebook “friends,” but do we know our neighbors? But what if Jesus meant that we should love our actual neighbors, the people
who live near to us? Wouldn’t it be great if we could mobilize our people to intentionally obey the second half of the Great Commandment? Imagine how our community would change! Imagine what would happen at Edgewood as people are won to Christ and begin worshipping with us! It would be incredible if God would launch a neighboring movement here in the Quad Cities.”

The authors suggest a simple strategy.

1. **Get to know the names of eight of your neighbors.** This helps us move from stranger to acquaintance to relationship. In order to love our neighbors it’s actually helpful to learn their names! We’re committed to do this when we move into our neighborhood later this week. I’ve also started doing it with the neighbors surrounding our church facility. I’ve met two so far. Marie put together a map for me so I can fill in their names as I meet them.

2. **Look for ways to serve.** This could be lawn mowing, shoveling, dropping off cookies, giving a ride, taking care of a pet when a neighbor is out of town, helping with DIY projects, etc.

3. **Be visible in your neighborhoods.** Take walks. Sit outside. Go on bike rides. Look for organic encounters.

4. **Plan and implement a block party.**

It would be a good idea for us to begin praying something like this: “Oh, God, don’t allow me to come into contact with anyone in need and leave him or her no better off than they were before I met them.”

The story is told of a photographer working for a Christian magazine. The editor commissioned him to photograph someone that characterized the destitute condition of humanity. After a great deal of searching he finally captured the perfect picture. From a shadowed alley he spotted a beggar pleading for food as he lay stretching toward a bakery that displayed freshly baked bread. The photographer got into position and eagerly snapped the picture.

Moments later he rushed the picture to his editor. The editor agreed that it perfectly depicted humanity’s misery. After congratulating the photographer the editor peered deeply into his eyes and asked: “And what assistance did you give him after you took his picture?” With a twist of discomfort the man softly confessed that he had done nothing. The editor responded: “You got the picture but you didn’t get the message.”

I wonder if that describes some of our missed opportunities? We get the picture of this parable but we end up missing the message.

2. **For unbelievers.** The question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” is easily the most important question any person can ask. The primary purpose of this parable is to convince those who think they’re good enough to realize that there is no way to inherit eternal life by doing good works.
You’re not good enough, but there is One who is good enough. Put your faith and trust in Jesus. Don’t be like the religious man who, instead of being justified by throwing himself on the mercy of God, tried to justify himself.

Don’t miss the main message of this story. If you are not yet a believer, don’t run out of here and try to just do a bunch of good works by being nice to your neighbors, thinking that will somehow get you into heaven.

It’s impossible to live up to God’s standards. Are you ready to admit that right now? The Law doesn’t save but shows us that we need saving. There can be no real conversion without conviction. That’s why you need a substitute, one who will take your place. That’s exactly what Jesus did.

Jesus is really the perfect Good Samaritan. Jesus comes along and sees us wounded on the side of the road. Satan has left us for dead and our sins have consumed us. Our dignity is robbed and our righteousness has been stripped.

When no one else cares, Christ comes to us and with compassion cleans our wounds and carries us to safety, paying our sin debt so that we will not be enslaved and guaranteeing our future. He pays for it all himself, bringing hope to the hopeless and healing to the wounded, forgotten and abandoned.

Why would we not respond in faith and receive all that He offers us?

**Invitation Prayer:** God, I confess that I fall way short of loving you and loving others. I am not only selfish; I admit that I am a sinner. I can’t help myself and nothing else seems to work either. Please rescue and redeem me so that I can be healed and forgiven. I believe that you sent your Son Jesus to fulfill the requirements that I cannot keep and right now I receive what He has done for me. I ask you, Lord Jesus to save me from my sins and it’s my desire to follow you for the rest of my life. If there’s anything in my life that you don’t like, please get rid of it. And help me now to go and do likewise for those who have fallen on the path. Give me your compassion and enable me to put my faith into action by serving others.

Closing Song: “I Stand”