

“Neighbour”

Text: Luke 10:25-37

Prayer: Ever-faithful God, inspire us with your words to be “good neighbours” that we may reach out to others as your hands of love and touch those who need our compassionate care.

Amen.

Today, I am going to preach on the parable of the Good Samaritan! This parable is one of the most familiar stories of all time. It’s so familiar that when we hear it again, we tend to put on our autopilot ears thinking that we already know this story so well. We know the characters and the plot in and out. Let me remind you that the point of this parable is not about Samaritans being nice and priests and Levites being bad people. No - the point of this story comes in the form of the lawyer’s question to Jesus: “Who is my neighbour?” We already know the conclusion that the Samaritan was the “good neighbour” even without revisiting the story.

Where are you in the story? Over the years, I’m sure we have all played most of the characters in this parable. Some of us have played the role of the lawyer, trying to get Jesus to explain the meaning of life. Others might have played the role of Jesus who listens to questions being asked and responds with a story for reflection. Whether we care to admit it or not, we might have played the role of the robbers. We might have put down others by our abusive words or actions. We might have bullied someone that left bruises unhealed. Many of us relate well to the wounded man. He is the only character in the story not defined by profession, social class, or religious belief. He has no identity at all except his human needs. Maybe we have to occupy his place in the story first — maybe we have to become the broken one to understand how it is to be a good neighbour - grateful to anyone who will show mercy and grace. Still, some of us have at one time played the role of the priest when we see someone with a broken car, but we pass by, not because we are uncaring people, but because the rules of our society tell us that only stupid ones would consider stopping on the side of the road to help strangers. We surely have played the role of the Levite when we saw someone being mugged but had no time to call 911 because we were late for our board meeting. We may have played the role of a good Samaritan, but there are just too many street people, too many requests for money and help, too many

people sleeping out in the cold, and too many vacant faces staring up at us. It's so difficult to know how or who to help. So, we strike up uneasy compromises, for fear that by helping one, we might hear another voice that demands more of us.

Admit it – every time we read or listen to this parable, there is always a “new” truth that is unearthed to which the parable points. Today, I would like you to think of the word, “neighbour”. What comes to mind when you hear the word “neighbour?” Someone living next door? A place that is close by? One who brings you casseroles and prays for you when you need one? The Hebrew word translated as “neighbor,” is *rea*, meaning “a friend,” “a companion,” or “an associate”. This means “someone we know”. In contrast to the Greek word used by Luke, the word used for neighbour is *plesios*, meaning “near” or “close to.” The Greek concept of neighbour involves a space that is absent in the Hebrew word. The word neighbor comes from the Old English *neahgebur*, meaning “near-dweller.” The first part, *neah*, means and gives us “nigh.” The second part, *gebur*, means “dweller.”

In this parable, Jesus taught a new definition of neighbour that is not restricted to relationships, space or proximity. And it's not just a neighbour that Jesus exemplifies in this story, but a good neighbour. Being a good neighbour is the demonstration of love and mercy to all in need, whomever and wherever they may be, regardless of race, colour or creed. Jesus teaches us that loving your neighbour is more than a noun, a feeling or a theory. Love is a verb – an action word and that requires the shouldering of others' burdens, an often, uncomfortable process. To be a neighbour, according to Jesus, means to come alongside someone.

But drawing lessons from this parable today presents a challenge. The world is much bigger, the problems often larger, the potential danger much higher, opinions more varied, and the methods and means are more complex. Nothing should change our ultimate responsibility: show mercy to those in need, like the Samaritan did to the beaten man. Does showing mercy and being a neighbour always mean relief? I believe Jesus is pointing out that the whole community or the world is our neighbourhood. This parable is about the breaking down of nationalism and even racism in favour of making the larger context our neighbourhood. When we understand the world as our neighbourhood, we will be better able to reach out to humanity from a part of

ourselves that is genuinely caring and loving, rather than feeling superior or being objective in our giving.

Is there anything we can do in our contemporary lives to fully understand the challenge at the heart of this parable? Think about it this way: Who is the last person on earth you'd ever want to proclaim as a neighbour? The last person you'd ask to save your life? Every day, people are beaten up and bruised by life. There are people who are in need--the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the sick, the abused, the grieving, the lonely, the oppressed. We pray for them, we think of them, we reach out to them. This parable tells us that we are part of a common humanity. We cannot be immune to suffering, either our own or another's. We put our faith in the Holy One who has compassion on us. Because of this love that we received from God, we are nudged to bandage others' wounds, and bring them to the inn of radical hospitality. Being a good neighbour according to this parable, reminds us that we cannot separate ourselves from another's tragedy. What Jesus did when he proclaimed the Samaritan "good" was radical and subversive. Jesus invites us to consider the possibility that human beings might add up to more than the sum of their political, racial, cultural, and economic identities. He calls us to put aside the history we cling to, the biases we embrace and the prejudices we nursed. Jesus asks us to allocate a room for divine and life-giving surprises.

Sometimes, when we hear heartbreaking stories of violence, deaths, acts of injustice and human callousness, we easily fall prey to being pessimistic that humanity has fallen. We easily forget that there are still many Good Samaritans out there who make the world a much brighter, kinder, better place to live in.

Newswriter Stephen Gould wrote these words soon after the 9-11 terrorist attacks:

“Good and kind neighbours outnumber all others by thousands to one. The tragedy of human history lies in the enormous potential for destruction in rare acts of evil, not in the high frequency of evil people... Thus, in what I like to call the Great Asymmetry, every spectacular incident of evil will be balanced by 10,000 acts of kindness, too often unnoted and invisible as the” ordinary” efforts of a vast majority. We have a duty, almost a holy responsibility, to

record and honour the victorious weight of these innumerable little kindnesses, when an unprecedented act of evil so threatens to distort our perception of ordinary human behavior”

Being a good neighbour comes in different shapes and sizes. Listen to some of these stories of modern Good Samaritans:

The late actor Robin Williams had a clause added to his movie contracts that required the production company to hire homeless people in the area so they could have jobs on the set.

A Jewish family who immigrated from Lithuania to the United States, took pity on a 7-year-old African-American boy and brought him to their home. There he stayed and spent the night in this Jewish family home, where for the first time in his life he was treated with kindness and tenderness. Later, the boy became a professional musician and composer. This little boy's name was Louis Armstrong, known for recording the famous song, What a Wonderful World.

A 36-year-old man from Toronto who experienced a medical episode is alive because of the heroic efforts of five men who risked their lives as the vehicle began to burn with the driver still inside. They got the driver's door open to save the driver,”

A young British boy is being hailed for an act of sportsmanship after his encouraging pep talk to his rugby teammate went viral. The boy held his teammate's shoulders and said: “Listen to me. Trust me. Look at me. I'm the shortest kid here. It doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter if you're short. You're young. It doesn't matter if you're taller. It doesn't matter if you're fat. You are a brilliant rugby player; do you understand that?” And he gave his teammate a big hug.

Someone from this congregation rescued an immigrant woman from being homeless by offering the woman opportunities to find a job so the woman can stay in the home that she's renting.

See and reflect for yourself, that in the 24-hour news cycle that speak of evil,
people still offer love;
someone helped an old lady cross the street;

keeping-in-touch phone calls were made;
bake goods and casseroles find their way to a needy family;
prayers for healing were lifted;
little girls and boys made new friends at camps;
someone paid for the coffee of the person behind them in line;
flowers were brought to Stillwater Creek;
someone risked their lives rescuing a drowning person;
a lost dog was brought to a safe shelter.

What kind of neighbour are you?

It is summer, and our life is supposed to be a bit more relaxed and fun. Jesus in this parable is not asking us to do more for our neighbour; God knows, every day, there is enough to do already! Jesus is reminding us to love more deeply right where we are and whenever we can. Be a good neighbour. Love a neighbour. Show the “Good Samaritan love” wherever and whenever the road takes you. Thanks be to God. Amen.