A Neighborly Church

Sermon 23 | Greystone Baptist Church | July 14, 2019

Luke 10: 25 - 37

Today's parable is one of the most quoted, well-known, and beloved pieces of scripture. It has been appropriated over and over again by preachers and politicians with agendas on all sides of theological and political divides. Their agendas range from the super-spiritual to partisan political. Applications vary from individual to communal. It is in true parabolic fashion, the simplest of stories with an unending variety of interpretations.

The Queen of England referenced it directly in her 2004 Christmas Eve address. Concluding that, "the implication drawn by Jesus is clear. Everyone is our neighbor, no matter what race, creed, or color. The need to look after a fellow human being is far more important than any cultural or religious differences."[i]

George W. Bush interpreted and applied the parable during his first inaugural address, promising the nation that he would care for the poor and the vulnerable, for new immigrants and all children. "We can agree that America, at its best, is compassionate… and whatever our views of its cause, we can agree that children at risk are not at fault.[ii] …I can pledge our nation to a goal: When we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we will not pass to the other side…"[iii]

Tim Keller, founder of the 5000-member, Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, writes in his book *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just,* "We instinctively tend to limit for whom we exert ourselves. Wo do it for people like us, and for people whom we like. Jesus will have none of that. By depicting a Samaritan helping a Jew, Jesus could not have found a more forceful way to say that anyone at all in need – regardless of race, politics, class, and religion – is your neighbor… and you must love your neighbor."

We have incorporated this parable so deeply into our culture that when you say, "Good Samaritan," people think they know exactly what you mean. We even have "Good Samaritan Laws" that protect those who volunteer aid to people in need and sometimes hurt them in the process.

There are so many interpretations used by so many different public figures that some are even saying that the parable can no longer speak for itself. It is too clouded by historical interpretation, too politicized and overly spiritualized.

A lawyer asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It's an individual, spiritual question. "What is written in the Law? What do you read there?" Jesus responds.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind," the lawyer quotes from Deuteronomy. "And your neighbor as yourself," he adds from Leviticus.

"You have given the right answer. Do this and you will live." Jesus responds.

He already knew the answer! Of course he did, he was a lawyer, in other words he was an expert of Torah Law. Just like the priests, scribes, and pharisees, he knew the scriptures backwards and forwards and still he begs Jesus to lay it out plain, "What exactly must I do to inherit eternal life?" … you can't really mean all of it… it's impossible… it's too much.

This persistence reminds me of the way children often question the sage instructions of their parents. I can hear Mia's voice now asking, "What do I have to eat before I can have my dessert?"

"Eat your vegetables, Mia."

"But which vegetables do I have to eat?" (implied question: "Which ones can I leave on the plate and still get dessert?")

When I read the question, "But who is my neighbor?" in this tenth chapter of Luke, I can't help but hear the unspoken one implying, "who is not my neighbor?" Who is beyond the boundaries of proximity and similarity? Who is different enough, or far enough away, or repulsive enough that I am not expected to love them?

Now, Jesus had just travelled through Samaria one chapter earlier in Luke's Gospel. He was aware that there were clear differences between the Jews in Jerusalem and those in Samaria. His disciples wanted to burn the village down, and Jesus stopped them. They may have worshipped the same God, but they did not follow the same rules. They shared common ancestry but could not peacefully occupy the same land – in fact the two groups were created by civil war in the biblical time of Priest Eli. Let it suffice to say, the lines between Jews and Samaritans were clearly drawn.

Lines of division like these can sometimes become obscured or diminished by history. We look back thousands of years later and ask ourselves why they couldn't see how much they had in common. Why couldn't the Jews and Samaritans reconcile their differences and find unity in their shared ancestry, or the worship of Yahweh, or even in their common humanity?

This week I found myself on an accidental pilgrimage of sorts. I went to Fredericksburg, Virginia to visit with family. This is a place I've been over and over again. Each time I go, I pass the Federal Cemetery and then the Confederate one. I pass signs that point tourists in the directions of battlefields, memorials, and historic monuments. Despite all these invitations to explore, for some reason, I've never paid much attention to the story of the land.

This time I decided that Mia and I would take a tour. It was really an attempt to get her out of the house for a little while but as we listened to our guide and heard tales of revolutionary and civil war battles, I began to see the land, the city, the streets and buildings with new light. In the middle of the tour, I began to feel the pain of division and

dehumanization as the words from Genesis 4 flowed through my mind, "What have you done? Your brother's blood cries out from the ground."

As I stood there in broad daylight, holding hands with my little girl, I remembered the middle passage and the slave labor that built up the southern economy. I remembered the dehumanizing words that were used to justify the mistreatment and abuse of thousands, if not millions of laborers. remembered the self-righteousness of the northerners who owned slaves themselves but who were threatened by the political power of the South. I remembered the collusion and confusion of issues that were social, racial, economic, and political all jumbled together creating an impossible divide. I remembered the resistance to changing the systems of oppression. I remembered all of it and the war that grew out of it. So many lives lost there on that land, brother fighting against brother, because of lines drawn and walls built up dividing north from south, slave from free.

Soon, the tour stopped atop a hill called Mary's Heights. The guide showed us a stone wall that stretched along the hilltop. "See this stone wall?" he asked as he proceeded to tell us the story of an epic battle between Union and Confederate soldiers on December 12th, 1862. Confederates were lined up behind the wall with instructions to defend it at all costs. Union soldiers who had already overcome the city of Fredericksburg saw the conquest of this wall a critical and final piece of claiming Fredericksburg for the North. Lines drawn clearly over 150 years ago still visible as the stone wall remains almost fully intact. Both sides fought hard through the evening and by daybreak on December 13th, nearly 8,000 soldiers lay on the battlefield some dead, many wounded.

After listening to the cries of injured soldiers throughout the night, one soldier, Richard Rowland Kirkland, asked his Commander if he could cross the stone wall and tend to the injured soldiers by bringing his canteen filled with water to those rendered immobile by the battle. Initially the General said no, but eventually he caved and granted permission to Kirkland. He did insist, however, that if he crossed that stone wall, he could not wave a white flag. He must tend to the wounded at his own risk and without surrendering the cause.

Kirkland understood that jumping across that dividing line between Union and Confederate would likely end with his being caught in the crossfire of one of our country's most brutal wars. He chose to do it anyway and before long soldiers on both sides noticed that Kirkland was not discriminating in his care. Rather, he was bringing water to all whose bodies stretched out across the boundaries that stood to divide brother against brother in this terrible conflict. Remarkably, Kirkland was not shot that day, nor did he rest until every soldier received a drink of water.

At least that's how the story goes.

Kirkland, often called the "Angel of Fredericksburg," is remembered for his courage, his compassion, and his willingness to transgress the superficial divisions of his day on behalf of righteousness and human decency. I wonder if he had read this parable before?

I wonder if, while Kirkland was listening to those voices cry out from the other side of the stone wall, he heard the voice of the ancient lawyer who asked: "And who is my neighbor?" And if he could hear the question, I wonder if he could also hear the voices of his generals and commanders saying, "those in the North, they are not your neighbor. They are not like us, they don't think like us, they don't understand us, and they abuse their power to govern us, so no… they are not our neighbor. We are not responsible for them… Let them find their own way."

There were people of deep faith on both sides of the wall that day who just couldn't see beyond the boundaries established and defended by both sides.

I wonder if Jesus had told this story in 1862, who he would choose to model love of neighbor, love that surpassed every boundary and every wall of division? Would it be a Northerner? A Southerner? A Slave?

I'm not sure when this parable became known as "The Good Samaritan," but sometimes I think the title distracts us from the challenge that it poses. The Samaritan may be the surprise hero but when we focus only on the actions of the Samaritan, we lose sight of the question that started all of it. "Who is my neighbor?"

The Lawyer knew what Torah said about who he was called to love. The very text from Leviticus that he quotes answers the question, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18)… "and when the alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." (19: 33-34).

The lawyer was an expert in Torah law; he knew what was required. He knew the requirement to love not just his neighbors in Israel, but also the foreigners who came and dwelt among them. So, I wonder why he asks the question, "Who is my neighbor?"

Was there someone in his life who had wronged him? Was there someone he just could not make himself love? Was there someone, or a group of someones he had already dehumanized in his mind… that he had deemed them unworthy of neighborly love?

I wonder if Jesus were telling this story today, who he might choose to be our surprise neighbor?

I wonder if we might need to listen to Jesus explain – in parabolic fashion – that our understanding of *who is our neighbor* needs to expand a bit? I wonder if we, like the lawyer, have grown comfortable with "neighbor" being limited to a 5- or 15-mile radius?

I wonder if the point of the story, at least for us today, is that rather than looking for the limits of our call to neighborly-love… maybe it's time for us to abolish the limits altogether, no matter the risk?

The Judean lawyer must have struggled with the idea that a Samaritan knew more about neighborly love than his kinfolk – the priest and the Levite. This would be as absurd as a Confederate soldier giving water to fallen Yankees on Mary's Heights. It would be completely unheard of because of the risk… the risk of social alienation, the risk of professional loss, the risk of losing life itself… and yet it is the very embodiment of neighborly love.

I wonder what might happen if we each ask ourselves the question that the lawyer asks… "Who is my neighbor?" And I wonder what might happen if we allow ourselves to also ask: "Who can I exclude from neighborly love?" With this kind of personal vulnerable honesty, we might discover some unpleasant truths about ourselves and our ingrained prejudices.

But, there is hope in this kind of honesty.

Throughout our history, Greystone has seen itself as a neighborhood church. Our founding members set out to become a church for this neighborhood. We knocked on doors and met our neighbors where they were. Since those early years, we have grown and changed along with our neighborhood. But as I think about the lawyer, the Torah scholar, and I consider the kind of church that the world needs, I wonder if it's time for us to shift from being a neighborhood church to being a neighborly church… a church that brings love of neighbor to life in risky and raw and unheard-of ways.

Maybe it starts with partnerships that lead us to Arkansas like the 5 who are serving there now. Maybe it looks like supporting innovative ministries like "A Place at the Table," Raleigh's first "pay as you can" restaurant. And maybe there are more neighbors waiting for us to see beyond our walls so we might be open to sharing new life with them…

When we can begin to see ourselves with honesty and vulnerability, we can begin to move forward together. We can see the walls that we have constructed and held up, walls that separate us from our neighbors, dehumanizing them and insisting that they are not worthy of love.

According to Jesus, breaking down that kind of barrier is the key to finding life. "Do this, and you will live." Jesus says.

So, the question remains to be answered, 2000 years and a million interpretations later… Who is our neighbor?

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[i] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/4125229.stm retrieved July 12, 2019
[ii] https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/inaugural-address.html retrieved July 12, 2019
[iii] https://www.nytimes.com/2001/01/21/us/the-inauguration-the-speech-in-his-address-bush-lingers-on-a-promise-to-care.html