

## **Let Me Be Your Neighbor!**

All Saints Lutheran Church

Luke 10:25-37

July 14, 2019

I offer what Jesus instructed his disciples to say as they greeted the villages they visited, “Peace be to this house, to all of you... Know that the kingdom of heaven has come near to you.”

Thank you for the opportunity to bring you this greeting and to bring the gospel in Jesus’ name. Helen and I have visited this community of faith since January. We have been neighbors. And soon we hope to join this community and become partners in discipleship, fellow sojourners in the journey of faith; family at the table of God.

Helen and I give thanks for you. We have heard of your faith. We knew Pastor Fred Zink and Ruth, who served you many years ago. I worshipped with this community when Pastor Lyle McKenzie first came here. And Pastor Wallace and I almost had a relationship, when I almost became his internship supervisor. He’ll have to tell that story in his own way. Wallace told me he is grateful we never met earlier....

In the spirit of the epistle reading, Helen and I give thanks for you. We have heard of your gifts and your faithfulness. We are attracted to your emphasis on adult education and have benefited from your community more than once. You are strong in developing interfaith relationships of respect, partnership in community service, reconciliation in the face of prejudice. You have a diversity of community and a diversity of worship. You take your care seriously, but you do not take yourselves too seriously. Something is bearing fruit here. We would like to taste that fruit with you.

When I retired five years ago, I said I was laying aside my call to a congregation in order to pursue my call to care for my family. I also said I wanted – and still do want – to discover what my baptismal call is – a call like your own call – a call to discipleship from the other side of the communion table.

I have said that retirement has given me the opportunity to do more of what I want to do – without the politics. And I have said I laid aside my call... but my call has not let go of me....

So, neighbors, grace to you... and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

A lawyer, a student of the law, a fellow quite familiar with debate and the splitting of hairs, asked Jesus, “What do I have to do to be saved? What do I have to do to claim my inheritance, my share of eternal life?”

Jesus is no fool. Jesus responded saying, “You tell me.... What does the law say?”

The lawyer answers astutely, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength... and your neighbor as yourself.”

“Oh, well done!” Jesus says. “Exactly right! Do this very thing, and you will live!”

The test is over. The lawyer passed. But the lawyer is not finished with Jesus. The lawyer wants more. The lawyer wants to put himself right – in God’s eyes, in Jesus’ eyes, in the eyes of those who are listening. Maybe everyone – God, Jesus and the crowd – know this man has not always loved God so completely, or his neighbor as much as he regarded himself.... “So, who exactly is my neighbor?”

See, Jesus knows that if we measure the identity, the dignity, and the worth of the neighbor, then we apportion or limit what love we must show this person.... Heaven forbid we love too much... or too often... or too wastefully... or ... dare we say, the wrong person!

But Jesus will not let the tables be turned. Jesus tells everyone listening a story. As the last scripture transitioned, so we now see... Do they want to hear? And will they hear?

So, the story begins... A man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho....What he was doing on this dangerous stretch of road we are not told. It is only hinted that he was one of us, one of the Jews, having home or business in Jerusalem.

Sadly, tragically, this person is mugged, robbed and left for dead.

That last evidence is crucial. He was left for dead. He looked dead. There was probably blood and gore and bodily fluids everywhere in the sand.

And for these reasons, and not apathy or disregard, the priest saw him and went out of his way to avoid him. As a priest, he was obligated by law, not to contaminate himself and make himself unworthy for his ritual duties as a priest. He was not uncaring; he was responsible and faithful. But not a neighbor!

And, so we do not think that this behavior is merely a matter of his character or attitude, a Levite, a man under the same obligations, does the same thing. He goes out of his way to not become involved. It was the duty of a Levite. But not a neighbor.

Which brings us to the Samaritan. A Samaritan, a stranger, someone from another country, another faith, another tradition, another law – maybe not – stops and literally gets his hands dirty. This person chooses to become ritually unclean in order to help someone victimized by violence. The Samaritan touches the victim's wounds and bandages them. He cleanses the wounds with oil and wine, something considered to have medicinal properties, something that is somewhat costly.

The Samaritan bears this person's burden, literally lifting him up, letting this unconscious person benefit from the convenience of the Samaritan's ride. It's going to be a long walk.

To where? Home? Whose home? Friends? Contacts? Business associates? Who will take responsibility for this victim? I guess the Samaritan will.

The Samaritan takes him to an inn and looks after him! All night! Which way was he going? In the same direction as the victim? In the other direction? We don't know! Except that he went out of his way... but not like the other two. Not to the other side, but to whatever side was necessary for the sake of solidarity, compassion, love of neighbor.

But he's not done. The Samaritan pays the bill so far and leaves the innkeeper his Mastercard. "I will pay whatever it costs. You have my word..... I am coming back."

Remember how this whole thing started? A lawyer approaches Jesus asking, "What do I have to do to have eternal life?"

Jesus answered with his own question, “What does the law say? What is required of you?”

“To love God body and soul... and to love my neighbor as myself.”

So, what was required of the priest? Same thing. And the Levite? Same thing. Did those two do what was required by law? Well yes, the law of love for God.... But not for neighbor.

“But who is my neighbor?” the lawyer insists. “How much am I required to give?”

Jesus won’t answer that – directly – Jesus, in fact, turns the question around: Who of the three was a neighbor to the man who fell among thieves?

There’s only one answer... The question is not, who is my neighbor.... The question is who am I a neighbor to?

How much do I have to do? How much is required? How much is necessary for you to be a neighbor to this man... this woman... this child....?

Do you want to hear what Jesus has to say? Do you hear it?

Do this, Jesus says, and you’re going to have all the life you can handle!

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I want to tell this story slightly differently. I do so because I want to reach the same point, but we don’t live in the same context as the first century Jews. Our times are different. But we see the same dynamics.

We’re just getting to know each other. You need to know one of my passions is the care of the environment. I see our planet in peril is one of the most serious problems of our time, of any time. It’s a spiritual problem. It’s a faith problem. It’s about stewardship of creation. Justice for the world’s poor and oppressed. Whether human or any other creature. And the question before us is this: how am I a neighbor to creation?

Tell the story this way. Creation has become a victim. The water, illustrated by this bottle, has become full of plastic and toxins and junk.

Who’s at fault? The story doesn’t care! It doesn’t matter! We waste a lot of time and energy and shame and blame, while the victim lies dying in the sand!

The story tells us nothing about the thieves and robbers. Let's not go there. They are not characters in the way the story unfolds!

The Scribe and the Priest walk by. We might wonder about that. We might be upset by that. They may – and do- have justification for what they do. It doesn't matter!

Ultimately, we are left with only two characters Jesus is interested in. The victim. And the neighbor!

Who is the victim? We don't know. We don't know history or future or reason for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. We only know this victim needs to be loved!

And who's the neighbor? I guess it's me! Maybe you?

The neighbor can't do anything right now to change the situation of the victim except clean the wounds, bind up the wounds, find a place to rest and give a little care. How much will that cost? Whatever it takes!

Let's tell the story again... There is an immigrant family. They don't belong here... rather they fear they don't. But they sure do belong! This is home now. This is school now. This is work now. This is our culture, our country, our neighborhood!

Who will be a neighbor to this family?

Tell the story one more time. There is a classroom that doesn't have enough supplies because budgets have been cut. And many of these kids cannot pony up the extra money; they can't even have a decent breakfast! Who will be a neighbor?

Did I tell you the story of the family looking after an aging parent? When someone says, "I'll pay what it costs," others do expect that! A senior can go into care having been frugal and sensible and saving for the future and begin care with sufficient resources, wealthy by some standards. And then in a few years die totally dependent upon the neighborliness, the welfare of others.

Who is the neighbor to these people? Who will love what God loves, whomever God loves, as God loves?

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The gospel began today with someone asking, "What do I have to do to be saved?" How is this story going to end?

Well, it seems that the story probably ends this way. The neighbor and God find they get along more and more as time goes by. They begin to tease one another.

One day, the neighbor says to God, "You'll never know who I saw today!"

God answers, "Who did you see?"

The neighbor responds, "There was this young lady in Rexall today. She had three kids. The youngest was asleep peacefully in the stroller but the other two were beginning to scrap...."

"Oh, yes," God says. "I saw them too. In fact, I think I saw them before you did!"

"What, no you didn't"

"Yes, I did!"

"Ok, never mind. Listen. I saw them first and I want to..."

"Ok, have it your way but you know I saved you just for them...."

"Thanks, I hope I can... what? You mean you saved them just for me?"

"No," God says, "I saved you just for them....."