

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR? – LUKE 10:25-37

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²⁵ On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” ²⁷ He answered: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” ²⁸ “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” ²⁹ But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰ In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’” ³⁶ “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” ³⁷ The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”



This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

I have great neighbors. That is one of the things we have come to enjoy about our neighborhood, we have great neighbors. Everywhere else we had been, our neighbors haven't been bad, but they haven't been great either. But now, living on Mayberry Place, we have great neighbors. Not only do we talk with our neighbors when we are out, but we have even started looking out for one another, we have gotten together for neighborhood block parties, we've shared meals with them. And Kristin can tell you about the multitudes of texts the ladies of our neighborhood send around.

It has truly been a blessing to have such great neighbors. We don't have loud parties keeping us up at all hours of the night, we don't have those awkward conversations, and in general, it makes it a nicer place to live. Good neighbors encourage you to be a good neighbor. But I can only say that about the dozen or so houses that reside on our street. When it comes to neighbors on another street or a mile away, I can honestly say, we don't have that same relationship with them, even though they would still be considered neighbors. And that's to say nothing about all the people in Tucson, Arizona or the rest of the United States. And I'm sure I'm not alone in thinking that way, there's only so many people you can know and be friends with.

So when it comes to being neighborly with others, how far should I go? That was a question that was bothering a certain Jew in our gospel reading for this morning. It bothered him because he wanted to know how much he needed to do to love his neighbor as himself, because this is what it would take to

get to heaven. It was such a simple question, with such a profound answer. WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR? It reveals:

1. How much more we have to know
2. How much more we get to show

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Jesus used a simple parable to describe WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR. But in this simple parable, he also revealed how much more we have to know. Look at the lead up to the parable. We encounter Jesus once more as he is teaching the crowds. An expert in the law stood up. Now when it says expert in the law, it very specifically means an expert in the Jewish law, primarily contained in the first five books of the Bible (which were all written by Moses) – books that we call the Pentateuch, books that the Jews called the Torah.

In this Torah, these experts in the Law counted up 613 laws that must be followed to get to heaven. This expert in the law then got up to challenge Jesus on this point, “**what must I do to inherit eternal life?**” Now, maybe this guy was trying to be a smart aleck and show Jesus up, or maybe he was genuinely interested in Jesus’ answer. Instead of answering the question simply, he responded with another question. Jesus turned him back to the law, “**What is written in the Law?**” This was his wheelhouse and he answered quickly summarizing all 613 of the laws contained in the Torah, “**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.**”

I can only imagine Jesus was glad that this expert in the Law answered in this way. So often, people majored in the minors, and instead of opening their eyes to the bigger picture, they were content with their small scope. But not this man, he summarized what the law was all about – Love God, love your neighbor. And so Jesus could respond, “**You have answered correctly.**” But then added, “**do this and you will live.**”

The man, like many today, saw this command of Jesus and saw it in something he was able to do. It’s simple enough, right? Just love God, check, and love your neighbor, check. But if only the man would have realized what Jesus was asking. With his follow up question he revealed how much more he needed to know. Thinking he could fulfill this command he asked, “**And who is my neighbor.**”

What follows is probably one of Jesus’ more famous parables. Even many who have not read the Bible have heard about the parable or the story of the good Samaritan. Although, to Jesus’ first listeners, they didn’t know in advance that a Samaritan would be the hero of the story. In all of their stories, the Samaritan was the bad guy. The Samaritan would have been the guy walking by on the other side of the road. In fact, the Samaritan probably would have been the bandit who beat up a God-fearing Jew.

Why this animosity toward the Samaritans? Like many grudges, this one took time. Samaritans lived in the central part of Israel, what today is considered the West Bank. Samaria was north of Judea, but south of Galilee. The primary bone of contention was a temple worship site. The Samaritans had one in their territory, on Mt. Gerazim, they believed this was to be the worship center of Israel. But when

Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem, the Samaritans refused to consider that as the place of true worship. And what started as something so small, magnified itself and divided a nation.

So divided were the Jews and Samaritans, that Jews went out of their way to avoid the region of Samaria, instead taking a far more difficult and dangerous path northward to Galilee. This path started in Jerusalem and weaved its way down to Jericho. This was the path the man in the parable took. It was not uncommon to find bandits and robbers along this path, and so it was unsurprising that a lone traveler was beaten up and left for dead. But then two individuals you would have expected to help – a priest and a Levite do not. They instead pass by on the far side of the road – not wanting to learn more about this half-dead traveler.

As the story is being told, I'm sure the people were all like, "Yea – that's just like the religious leaders, just looking out for themselves. Let's see who comes along next to help him. Wait, I bet I can guess, it'll be a Jewish lay-person. He'll be the hero of the story." But much to their surprise, it was a Samaritan, a detestable Samaritan. They would have expected the Samaritan to hurt the body more, but instead he didn't. He took care of the man, and even took him to an inn and cared for him, taking money out of his own pocket to make sure this man would recover.

Then, as Jesus waited for the awe to disappear from the crowd's faces, he asked the question, **which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?** When put like that, the expert in the law had no choice but to answer, "the man who showed mercy." WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR? My neighbor is not just someone next to me, or someone I like, but everyone is my neighbor. In this simple parable, Jesus showed how much more we need to know.

Because when we ask the question "who is my neighbor?" we might as well be asking "who is not my neighbor?" Because wasn't that what the expert in the law was trying to determine? Who do I have to show love to, and who don't I have to show love to? His attitude is revealed by Scripture when it says, **"he sought to justify himself."** This man sought to find out to what extent he must show love. And haven't we done the same? Think about what Jesus is asking. He is asking us to be a neighbor to everyone. If your response is the same as mine, we would say that's impossible. There is no way I can show neighborly love to everyone I meet. I'm not able spare the money, the effort or the time.

It's only then that we begin to realize what Jesus was getting at. It's only then that we realize we can't do what Jesus is asking, no matter how hard we try. In fact, not only have we not been able to be a neighbor to everyone we meet, we have not always shown ourselves to be neighborly to just those around us. Oh, I'm sure there have been some times we have loved our neighbor as ourselves, but not all the time. Even within our own families we have often turned inward, forsaking our siblings, spouses and offspring. Such a simple question, WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR? But when we think about it, we realize how much more we need to know.

We can come up with all sorts of excuses for why we've acted the way we did, but our excuses make no difference to God. Because our excuses just reveal how little love we've shown to God. All of this reinforces the point that we have failed when it comes to inheriting eternal life, because we cannot love our neighbor as ourselves, not saying anything about loving God with all your heart, soul and mind.

But it's when we have lost all hope of saving ourselves that Jesus shows us that he is our neighbor. He became our neighbor by being born of a virgin, living his life here on this earth. There was only one thing different, the book of Hebrews summarizes it nicely, "**he was tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin.**" Not only did Jesus not sin, but he could not sin. All his actions were just. He alone was able to "**love the Lord his God with his whole heart, soul, strength and mind, and love his neighbor as himself.**" But he didn't do that to just show us the way to be saved, he did it to be the way to be saved.

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WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR? Jesus is my neighbor. He did not wait for us to come begging him for help (because it wouldn't have happened), he came and sought us out. He came and gave to us a ticket to eternal life, we no longer have to ask "what must I do to get to heaven?" He gave us the definition of WHO IS OUR NEIGHBOR. And when we know that we have a neighbor who has not only our back but our very lives, the parable of the Good Samaritan takes on a new meaning. Instead of looking at the parable and thinking how much more I need to know, we look at it and see, how much more I get to show.

Our whole motivation is changed. We strive to imitate Jesus and not just wait for our neighbors to come to us for help, but we go out and look to help them. In addition to offering to help, we will listen and observe to discern ways that we can help. We look for different ways that we can serve our neighbor despite their actions or lack of actions toward us – whether they are our actual neighbor, or if they're a neighbor half-way around the world.

As Christians, we have wonderful opportunities all around us to love our neighbors. We can show love to our neighbors who live on our block, much like my neighborhood is. We can show love to those who live in our city individually or by partnering with humanitarian aid organizations, or we can show love to our neighbors around the world by helping to support projects and missionaries. Right within our very church body – the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod – we have organizations just like this. Christian Aid and Relief is an organization run by our church body who specializes in helping the physical needs of people. This is an organization you can help support as well.

Being a good neighbor means looking for peoples' physical needs, but it also means looking out for their spiritual needs. And so while we strive to be good earthly neighbors, we will always be looking for an opportunity to share an invitation to be heavenly neighbors. An invitation that is only extended because of Christ our good neighbor. For it is our Savior who loved God perfectly and loved his neighbor perfectly. It is perfect love that covers us, that makes us perfect. This perfect love then gives us the perfect reason and motivation to love our neighbor as ourselves. Amen.