

## WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is our text for today. From Luke 10, verses 36 & 37:

*<sup>36</sup> "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" <sup>37</sup> The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."*

Dear Friends in Christ,

"Like a good neighbor, State Farm is there." That's a catchy little jingle, isn't it? "Just like a good neighbor, State Farm is there." Did you know that this was written for State Farm back in 1971 by the singer/songwriter Barry Manilow? This slogan implies that there are certain qualities that make a person or an insurance company a good neighbor.

(Summary) Today, we look to the words of Jesus for the qualities that make a good Christian neighbor. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus gave us a much broader meaning of the word, "neighbor," than most of us are comfortable with, but a meaning that encourages us to show Christ-like love and compassion to those in need.

The Good Samaritan is probably one of the most widely recognized stories in the Bible. For one thing, it's a good story. It's timeless in its message and its challenge. But it is a multi-layered story that is often oversimplified. We will look at this parable and its surrounding verses layer by layer to get to the point of the message.

*<sup>25</sup> "On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus." The simple question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" is the first layer of the parable. Now to be fair, this was a loaded question. If the Bible said that a man on the street asked this question we might be inclined to believe that this was a genuine question. But it's not just anyone who asked. It was a lawyer. The title *lawyer* indicates that this man was an expert in the law. In particular, this lawyer was a student of the Mosaic Law, the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. We don't know his name, but what we do know is that he came to Jesus with a question to test Jesus' understanding of the law, "Teacher . . . what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

Jesus didn't give an answer. Instead he directed the lawyer back to the Scriptures. *"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"* Jesus knew the lawyer had an answer. He simply wanted to hear it from his own lips. The lawyer 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."* *"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."*

Just as the lawyer asked a loaded question, so Jesus gave a loaded answer. *"Do this and you will live."* Love God with **all** your heart and with **all** your soul and with **all** your strength and with **all** your mind. Love God and love your neighbor as you are commanded in the Bible, and you will inherit eternal life. As a student of the law this man knew God's standard for obedience to the law. Leviticus 19:2

*"Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy. (NIV). Leviticus 11:44 ". . . be holy, because I am holy," Leviticus 11:45 ". . . be holy, because I am holy," Leviticus 20:26 "You are to be holy . . . because I, the LORD, am holy." And if perchance he had listened to Jesus earlier, he had heard Jesus affirm and validate that standard. Matthew 5:48 "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (NIV).*

In other words, keep the law PERFECTLY, without any errors, and you will inherit eternal life. Talk about a loaded answer, but Jesus wanted the lawyer to see the futility of using obedience to the law to gain eternal life. Jesus wanted the lawyer to see his need for Jesus.

The indication that the lawyer understood what Jesus meant is found in the next verse from Luke 10. <sup>29</sup> *But he wanted to **justify** himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"* What's the lawyer really asking? He's trying to narrow the field of those whom he is to love as he loves himself. He's trying to exclude responsibility for others by making some people "non-neighbors."

So Jesus responded with a story. The next layer of the lesson is revealed.

The story took place on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, a notoriously dangerous route. In Jesus' day, the old road between Jerusalem and Jericho was a seventeen-mile path with narrow rocky stretches and blind turns, which made it easy for robbers to ambush travelers. This would have been common knowledge for the original listeners of Jesus' story...and no surprise that a human being was mugged and beaten and left for dead along the side of that road.

That's all we know about victim, that he was a human being. We don't know if he was young or old, Jewish or Gentile, if he was wealthy or poor, a good person or a bad person. He's just a naked, completely vulnerable, beaten person, left to die on the side of the road. The only thing we know about the victim was that he was a human being.

We know more about the people who passed him by, or at least we know about their professions. The first passer by was a priest. The priest was one of those religious leaders who were most knowledgeable of the law. The priest knew that if this man were dead, and if he touched a dead man, he would be made ceremonially unclean. He would lose his right to officiate in the temple until he underwent a ceremonial cleansing. The priest abided by the rule book of an ethical theological system. – His life was a system of do's and don'ts. He didn't stop and help because he wanted to save his job. To be fair, he may have had compassion for the man, but job security kept him from doing the right thing. The listening lawyer would have understood this.

The second passer-by was Levite, another religious official. Levites were the temple workers. The Levite would not have had as many restrictions as the priest. He could have rendered aid and not been in trouble legally or ceremonially. And we see that he did approach the man. Luke

says, the Levite “*came to the place and saw him.*” Scholars speculate that there are three reasons why he passed by: First, in all likelihood, he knew the priest had passed by before him. If the priest passed by, then shouldn’t he pass by also? Or maybe he was afraid that the same fate would fall on him, so scurried on by out of fear. Lastly, maybe he didn’t know the helpless man’s religion or social class, and so he didn’t see him as a neighbor, as someone who deserved his help. The listening lawyer would have understood the Levite’s predicament, too.

The third passer-by was a Samaritan. This was as if Jesus said, “the low-life, good for nothing, scum of the earth came by.” There were centuries of animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Samaritans were cursed daily in the Jewish synagogues and prayers were lifted up hoping that the Samaritans would not be partakers of eternal life. That’s pretty significant hatred, if you pray for someone to go to hell.

But like a good neighbor, the Samaritan is there. This Samaritan went above and beyond reasonable expectations in helping the beaten man. Not only did the Samaritan render basic aid, he showed compassion to a complete stranger. He bound the man’s wounds, gave him his clothes, put him on his donkey, took him to an inn, paid for his room and food, and promised to come back and ‘be there’ for him in the days to come as he recovered.

When he finished the story, Jesus asked the expert in the law, “*Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?*” The lawyer couldn’t even bring himself to spit out the word “Samaritan.” He simply mumbled, “*The one who had mercy on him.*” Jesus said, “*Go and do likewise.*”

We are at the next layer of the lesson. The point of the story isn’t “what do I have to do to earn heaven” or “what do I have to do to get right with God.” This is more than just a story about morality and about being nice, because anybody can be good. Even unbelievers or non-Christians can “do the right thing” on occasion.

Even unbelievers or non-Christians can follow the Golden Rule, ‘doing to others what they want others to do to them.’ If Jesus just wanted us to take home the Golden Rule as the main point of the lesson, the title of the parable would have been “the Good Person.” It’s not. It’s the Good Samaritan. The parables of Jesus sometimes have something surprising or unexpected, something to be wrestled with and puzzled over. In this story, it is the fact that an unwanted, despised and rejected Samaritan is the one who showed mercy to a complete unknown who might even have been his enemy. The unexpected element is the fact that a despised Samaritan was ‘like a good neighbor’ to a man in need.

Now we peel back another layer. It’s one thing to know the right thing, it’s another thing to do the right thing. Remember the lawyer? He knew the right thing to say. Jesus knew he was being condescending in his questioning. But Jesus pushed the lawyer to think not with his mind, but with this heart. This parable is about a change of heart. It’s about how believers’ hearts are changed and continue to change by the Holy Spirit working through the Means of Grace. It’s

about how you, with your changed heart, will feel compassion for someone in need, not motivated out of a desire to earn eternal life, but motivated out of gratitude and love for God.

Jesus was really explaining his mission to the lawyer. Jesus came to take the “I” and the “me” out of our soul’s salvation. Jesus came as Luther said, “as God’s Good Samaritan.” Jesus came because we cannot pull ourselves out of the brokenness, the bondage of sin which engulfs us each day. We cannot save ourselves no matter how much we try. To the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus says, “nothing.” You cannot save yourself, that’s his job. It is the sacrifice of his life that pays the penalty for our sin. Through faith in Jesus, believers are lifted out of the ditch, redeemed, restored and forgiven, and empowered to live for him.

In the parable, the Good Samaritan promised to return and follow the progress of the beaten and robbed man. How do you think this man responded to the Samaritan when he returned for a visit? Considering the extent of his injuries and the lack of help from others, I’m sure he was grateful beyond measure, thankful that his life had been spared.

We too are grateful for the salvation won for us by Jesus. He saved us not only from the ditches of life, but from an eternity in hell. We have so much for which we can be thankful. This sense of gratitude and thankfulness is the only proper motive to compel us to do good to others. Service to others is not done for a reward from God. The reward, eternal life, is given to believers as a free gift, no string attached. Your service, your compassion, your sacrifice comes from a changed heart, a loving heart which has been loved so much by Christ that it wants to love others in return.

Jesus has removed us from the ditches of life and put us in positions where we can now help our neighbors. The parable of the Good Samaritan is not telling us how we believers should act. It is showing us how we will act toward our neighbor in loving response to our Lord and Savior. The way we love our neighbor is simply a reflection of God’s love for us.

“Neighbor” is not defined by how close a person lives to you or whether they’re from the same ethnic background or socio-economic group. A “neighbor” is someone, anyone, who needs your care and concern. We are most comfortable with and usually find it easier to care for those who are like us. But in today’s society, we live side-by-side with people of many different backgrounds. We are surrounded by people who are different from us and who need our help. Being a good neighbor may mean stepping out of your comfort zone to help someone in need who’s very different from you.

It may be something small but helpful, like holding open a hospital elevator door so a woman with three young children and a fourth in a stroller are able to board. Not a word of English is spoken, but you can tell by the smiles and the look of relief that your small act of kindness was appreciated. Like a good neighbor you were there.

Here's another true story of a Good Samaritan moment. An older white couple is standing in the "returns" line at Walmart and strike up a conversation with the young black man behind them who's holding his three year old niece. There's plenty of time to chat because it's Walmart and the line isn't moving. Suddenly the little girl tells her uncle she has to use the bathroom. Awkward moment. Does the uncle give up his place in line and take his little niece into the men's washroom? No. The older lady volunteers to take the little girl into the women's washroom which brings about a much more comfortable outcome for all. It wasn't much. It was a simple act of kindness to help someone in need, like a good neighbor.

Our little church body, the Wisconsin Synod, is a good neighbor to people across the country and around the world. The Christian Aid & Relief agency, mentioned in today's service folder, assists victims of natural disasters wherever they occur without regard to nationality, ethnicity or religion. In times of earthquakes or hurricanes or floods or tornadoes, just like a good neighbor the Christian Aid & Relief group is there. Your support of Christian Aid & Relief helps this program bring needed aid even to non-Christian countries and to people we otherwise couldn't reach.

When will your next Good Samaritan moment occur? When will you have the chance to "go and do likewise"? Remember, your "neighbor" is anyone in need. Motivated out of love and gratitude to God you can use that Good Samaritan moment to render assistance and, at the same time, to give glory to God. Just like a good neighbor, will you be there? Amen.