

Who Is My Neighbor?

Pentecost 5, Year C,

Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh

14th July, 2019

Psalm 25:1-10 CEV / Luke 10:25-37 NIV

Who is my neighbor? When we think of that term, what is our first thought?

The person who lives next door, down the block, or in our building,
for those of us who dwell in apartments or condos.

Maybe it's our friends or acquaintances, or members of our church family.

From a faith perspective, it's a question that's been debated for millennia,
predating Christianity, as our parable from Luke this morning illustrates.

Probably the most famous of the biblical parables,
very few people have not heard the story,
and most find their way to this same question.

Who is my neighbor?

Where does my responsibility lie in looking after the concerns of others?

This is the vexing question the scribe in the story asks of Jesus,
whether in an attempt to test him,
or to legitimately find out the answer to that age-old question.

Yet, even Jesus doesn't supply a clear answer to that question.

He doesn't say that this person or that is or is not to be considered one's "neighbor."

But maybe the bigger question is, why is that a question we even need to ask?

When we think of this story, that is often what we focus on.

We look at the priest and the Levite who passed by on the other side,
and usually criticize them for their religious piety and exclusion,

which makes them bad “neighbors.”

In the Christian arena,

we have debated if our neighbors are simply our brothers and sisters in Christ,
our neighbors by physical proximity, our fellow countrymen, and on and on.

We have spent a lot of time trying to delineate those who deserve our help.

But potentially even more problematic,

this story is told entirely from the perspective of the needs of the non-victims.

“What must he do to inherit eternal life?”

What are the redeeming qualities of the Samaritan to emulate
and how is he a good neighbor?”

We hear precious little about the victim.

So what are we to make of this story?

On the surface, it is a story about showing mercy and kindness to those in need.

But if we dig a little deeper, we find a much broader statement

about what our fundamental outlook should be
towards the “others” we interact with.

This interlude is all about how we relate to each other as human beings,

how we view each other.

This parable is so well-known and widely used that we often go overboard in analysis.

We look at the priest and the Levite

and hypothesize why they passed by this victim in need.

We interpret it as a matter of too much focus on the law,

thinking that they risked ritual impurity
by potentially touching a dead body.

Yet that misses the just as legitimate argument

that to leave a body unburied

was just as much a taboo in Jewish religious culture.

And the story gives us no indication

that there was any sign that the victim appeared to be dead.

So if we discount the impurity theory, then why would they pass by on the other side?

Is that really something we are unfamiliar with?

I think we've all experienced similar circumstances.

Going about our daily lives, we all have those experiences

where we are presented with someone in need who makes us uncomfortable.

SLIDE

The homeless person in front of Starbucks

or planted along an exit to the freeway with a sign.

The person broken down along the side of the road.

The hitchhiker on a remote country road.

Like those first two travelers in our story,

don't we often feel threatened and uncomfortable?

I'm sure similar questions run through our minds.

What if he or she is a decoy and I'm falling into a trap to be robbed?

What if they smell really bad?

If they look very different from us, sad to say,

we often feel uncomfortable as well.

SLIDE

Too often we respond, whether consciously or not

to the prejudices that still permeate our culture.

If they have a different skin color, cultural, or religious identity,

we often are wary and cautious about offering assistance.

Yet Jesus makes the hero of the story

the very person his audience would be least likely to identify with.

A Samaritan, one of those heretics

that have twisted the Jewish faith into something they can't identify with;

someone that is the bane of their existence

and to be avoided at all costs.

Yet that is who demonstrates mercy and kindness.

And make no mistake, just because he is a Samaritan

doesn't mean that he doesn't have purity laws to be worried about.

They both derive their laws and religion from the same Old Testament.

Both Jews and Samaritans would worry about being "clean" enough

to partake in temple worship, just at different temples..

Which really drives home the point that this has nothing to do with religious law

and everything to do with how we view others,

especially others who are very different from ourselves.

SLIDE

There is a modern version of the story told of a young woman

who was moving her children to a new home on a cold winter's day.

It is difficult to imagine more bleak circumstances;

the young mother and her small children,

truck packed full of all of their belongings,

were in process of moving from rural North Carolina

to the mother's childhood home in Connecticut.

Life had taken a tragic turn only a few months earlier,

as her handsome young husband

had been killed during training exercises at Fort Bragg,

leaving the young widow with two children under the age of four.

Now, at the encouragement of friends that this would truly be best,

she had determined to move back home to Connecticut,

back to live with her ailing mother.

Father had been gone for nine years now,

and it seemed the best thing to do in the situation.

A light snow greeted the young family as they awakened on Sunday morning

somewhere north of Philly, but determined to move ahead,

the young mother hustled the kids off to Denny's for breakfast.

Leaving the restaurant and driving up the New Jersey Turnpike,

her thoughts returned again and again

to the incredible events of the past few months;

she wondered again if it were true, or all just a bad dream.

"Well", she thought, "maybe there'll be a fresh start in Danbury."

It was just south of Newark when the engine in the truck started to miss,

and before she knew it, something had gone terribly wrong—

right in the middle of one of the worst metropolitan areas in the country.

Now she was scared; this was not the place to break down!

Cold and terrified, the young mother climbed from the cab of the Ryder truck

and surveyed her options.

Who'd stop to help her at 10:30 on a Sunday morning, she wondered,

and could the person be trusted?

SLIDE

Rev. Scott Dabney, for over 35 years the rector of St. Michael's,
was hurriedly making his way to church services.

His alarm hadn't gone off—again—
and while his habitual tardiness was something of a standing joke
around the parish, it still embarrassed him to be late.

Perhaps he could make up time on the Turnpike, he thought.

As he sped along,
he couldn't miss the sight of the big yellow truck up ahead,
and what looked to be a worried young woman
standing by the side of the truck.

As she put her face in her hands,
he thought to himself that there must be something wrong.
A voice inside him said, "stop", and he considered this option,
even as he passed the truck—but then glancing again at his watch,
he realized that if he did,
there'd be no way he could make it to the service in time.

He'd put a lot of time into the morning's message—
and so as he glanced in the rear view at the truck and the lady,
he breathed a silent prayer that God would send someone along...

Dave Greene thought he recognized Pastor Dabney's car up ahead—
the "Clergy" bumper sticker amid the rust
of what had to be the only brown AMC Gremlin in Newark gave it away.
Dave was an "up-and-comer" at St. Mike's;
Pastor Dabney knew deacon material when he saw it,
and had mentioned the possibility to Dave

on a couple of occasions already.

As the Greenes followed along,

Dave too noticed the Ryder truck and the distraught lady,
and the thought crossed his mind as well to stop.

But frankly, it was pretty cold outside,

and having had to miss church the past couple of weeks
due to business trips weighed on his mind;

it wouldn't do too well for a deacon to keep missing services.

As he passed the truck, he looked in the rear view

and saw a little blonde head pop up from behind the dashboard.

"Lord, take care of that little family", he prayed as he sped past.

Meanwhile, the young mother waited, and a shiver ran down her spine.

She couldn't tell whether that shiver stemmed more from the cold
or from the situation at hand.

Silently she breathed a prayer to a God

to whom she hadn't spoken much since her husband's death.

Soon, a car did pull over,

and quickly from the front seat sprang two men,

each wearing the distinctive head coverings marking Muslim men.

SLIDE

Uncertainty struck her as she watched the two men quickly approach—

Debating whether to jump back in the truck and lock her doors,
she froze for a split second,

and before she could say or do anything,

the driver spoke up. "Can we help you?" he asked,

and a wide smile spread over his face.

Grabbing a cell phone from his belt,

the other man dialed the number on the side of the Ryder truck,

while the driver spoke words of encouragement

to the young mother.

In short order, two Muslim ladies, dressed in colorful long dresses,

the sisters of the driver, pulled up in an SUV,

and after locking up the truck,

the young family climbed into the SUV for a trip to McDonald's

with the ladies and their brother,

while the second Muslim man waited in the cold for the mechanic.

At St. Mike's, Pastor Dabney delivered his message,

as the Dave Greene family listened. His subject? "Love thy neighbor as thyself."

A version of the parable a little more relevant to our time, perhaps,

and hitting a little closer to home.

So the question is, should we even be asking who our neighbor is?

Inherent in that question is whether somebody is worthy of our help.

By asking that question, we also make the situation about us,

instead of the "other."

Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded us of an important part of this lesson.

He once said, "The first question the priest and the Levite asked was:

'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?'

But ... the Good Samaritan reversed the question:

If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"

Do we make it about us, or about "them?"

That's kind of the point isn't it? There shouldn't be a "them."

When we make it about us, we lose the whole point.

Mercy does not ask first about color or sexual identity or economic status
or political party or culture or religion.

Mercy is not concerned with deserving or purity or piety.

Mercy is what comes from God to the community and to each of us.

Ours is a God of mercy and compassion, a God that has sacrificed all for us,
yet we continue to hold back

in our own opportunities to reach out to others,

"others" who make us uncomfortable,

who we don't understand

(often because we choose not to really try to understand).

It's easy to pass by on the other side.

It's much harder to be on the "other's" side isn't it?

There's risk involved, and cost.

We won't be too popular

taking the homeless person into Starbucks for a snack and coffee.

Our friends in conservative circles

won't be impressed because we advocate

for those who seek refuge in our country at the southern border.

Our district body in our own church has learned well

that one does not make friends and influence people

in the broader denomination

by recognizing the inherent worth and value

of those whose sexual orientation or gender identity

differs from what many consider the “norm.”

But do we really have a choice?

SLIDE

When people are starving on the street without shelter,

when children are put in cages with no more resources

than one gives a common dog,

when LGBT people are attacked and killed just for who they are,

do we have the option to cross over to the other side and pass by?

It doesn't matter who our “neighbor” is defined as,

it matters who we are and what we choose to do.

May we make the choice to always be on the “other's side”

and stop asking “who is my neighbor?”

because God's love has no boundaries, and neither should ours. Amen.