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All God's Children UMC

Whose neighbor is it anyway?

A Sermon on Luke 10:25-37

Let us pray.

Loving God, come and dwell among us this day as we gather to study your word.

Open our hearts that we might receive what you would have us to hear this day.

In your holy and precious name we pray.

Amen

One Sunday a pastor invited all of the children in the congregation up for the children's sermon. The pastor asked the children a question, "What is brown, furry, and has a long bushy tail?" The children sat in silence for a moment, not knowing quite how to answer. After a few moments a young boy spoke up, "I know the answer is Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me."

How often do we come to God thinking we know the answer even before the question is asked? As human beings we like to think that we have an answer for everything and often times we miss the question because we are focusing so hard on the answer that we think we know.

The lawyer that comes to Jesus in Luke 10:25 comes thinking that he knows all the answers. He comes to Jesus to ask him a question not because he wants to know the answer, but because he wants to test Jesus. Jesus answers the man's question with two more questions. In responding to the lawyer's question in this manner Jesus is positioning

himself as a teacher. In the time and place where Luke was writing, many teachers used questioning as a way for their students to come to the correct answer. In responding to the lawyer's question with questions Jesus has effectively turned the tables on the man who is testing him by becoming his teacher.

The lawyer 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; and your neighbor as yourself." His response is a collection of many different things taught throughout the Jewish Scriptures and proves that he knows these scriptures well. Jesus praises this answer with his response in verse 28, ". . . do this, and you will live."

But the lawyer is not content with this. He decides that he needs to justify himself. He asks the question, "And who is my neighbor?" Who *is* my neighbor? Most of us think about our neighbors as the people who look like us, think like us, and have a similar background to us. For instance, since I go to Duke Divinity School I tend to think of my neighbors as the sort of people that I spend my time with at Duke Divinity School. That group of people is mostly upper-middle class white people with a Christian background. We consider people who are like us to be our neighbors because we relate most easily to them and because we tend to associate with the people that are most like us. The lawyer's answer to this question would likely have been something like, "our fellow Jews." But this is not the answer that Jesus gives.

When people are like us we understand them and therefore it is easy to help them. I was once on a mission trip in high school that was headed to Louisiana. This particular mission trip was made up of high school aged musicians from all over the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church. The first night that we were on the road we

ran into a small bump. During that day, the students had been rowdy and the adult leaders of the trip had gotten complaints from the restaurant where we had stopped for lunch. The adults decided to come down hard on the students and after we had been “talked to” we were all feeling a little bit down. As we were exiting the building to head back to our dorms to go to sleep, I noticed a girl from the trip was crying, so I pulled her aside and prayed with her. In the coming weeks my praying with her opened up conversation between us and I was able to help her with the particular problem she was having. Being a help to my neighbor in this particular situation was low risk for me because I knew that I was in a group of people who had similar values and experiences to the ones that I had. It would be easy to stick in situations like this where we are comfortable, but Jesus depiction of our neighbor gives us a new perspective on the type of people we are supposed to help.

Often God calls us to places where we are uncomfortable. I have experienced a call out of my comfort zone with my placement in this church for the summer. A big part of my internship this summer has been working with Athletes and Authors, the Summer literacy program at the Place of Possibilities. My main job in this program is to be a teacher’s assistant in one of the literacy classes. Now, you must understand I do not consider myself good with children and I do not have much experience with them. So, when I realized that I was being called to work with kids this summer it was a big challenge for me. But I have stepped out of my comfort zone and I continue to be challenged daily but I know that God is working through me and that I am doing God’s work.

The story that Jesus tells here is the story of the Good Samaritan, which is perhaps one of the most famous stories in the Bible. In order to understand what Jesus is really asking of us we need to understand who each of the characters are in this story. First of all,

we have the priest and the Levite. Both of these people were leaders of the Jewish religion of the time. The priests ran the temples and were responsible for all sacrifice and religious practices of the Jewish faith of Jesus' day. Levites were very similar to priests. Levites are the descendents of the tribe of Levi, which in the Jewish tradition is the tribe of priests. So both of these men were religious leaders in the Jewish culture of the time.

We also must understand the problems that were inherent in traveling at this time. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a very dangerous place. This is evidenced by the fact that the man got beat up in the first place. There were bandits waiting around corners to beat travelers up and to take their possessions and even to kill them. If a traveler happened across someone who was injured lying in the road they would leave themselves vulnerable to being attacked if they stopped to help.

It is also important to realize that the Jewish law had serious rules about dealing with dead or dying people. Coming into contact with a dead body or even blood would make a Jew unclean. These laws are so strict that a person can be made unclean by simply walking over a grave, even if the grave is unmarked. To ritually cleanse yourself as a Jew was difficult and time consuming and these cleanliness laws were even stricter for the religious leaders. So when the priest and the Levite pass by the man who has been beaten up, they have good reason to do so.

Even with all the obstacles the priest and the Levite would both be prime candidates to stop and help a Jew that had been beaten up on the side of the road. These men were considered the holiest men in Jewish society and they would have seen a fellow Jew as their neighbor and yet, neither one of them stopped to help their neighbor who was in need.

The one who did stop was a rather unlikely character, a Samaritan. Now, a Samaritan is an inhabitant of Samaria which in and of itself is not important. What is important is how Samaritans were viewed in the Jewish society of Jesus day. Samaritans were a mix between Assyrian and Hebrew and were not recognized by the Jews even though they taught the books of Moses. The Samaritan had as much to lose as the priest and the Levite if not more. The Samaritan had the same danger of being beat up and being made unclean as the religious leaders did. Plus the Samaritan had the added knowledge that if their roles were reversed that the Jew would probably not stop to help him.

So from the perspective of a Jewish man in the context of a conversation about the Jewish law this sets up a strong contrast with the priest and the Levite. In this story the righteous religious leaders pass by the person who need their help while the Samaritan, the lowest of the low, stops to help. If this story were taking place in our society today and one of us were the ones that were injured and left for dead in a ditch then it might be a businessman who does mission work at his church and a pastor that pass us by, while an illegal immigrant who barely speaks English stops to help us.

So what does this mean for us today? As we all know, helping people can be dangerous. If you stop to help someone who has a flat tire you could be beaten and robbed. If you perform CPR on someone you could be sued. If you ask a friend if they need help then you could be humiliated in front of your other friends. Not to mention the fact that if you stop to help someone you will inevitably be slowed down and potentially not get to where you are going on time. As I said helping people can be dangerous for us. Does that mean that we should not help people? Jesus is telling us that we should help not just when it is comfortable or convenient. We should take every opportunity to help the people in

need even if the situation is potentially dangerous, even if the person is different from us, even if it will make us late for the meeting to which we are headed.

Jesus calls us to reach out to our neighbor. In Jesus example he shows that our neighbor is all of humanity, not just our people who are like us and who live where we live. This call means that we need to go outside of our comfort zone and potentially into harms way for someone that we meet on the street. Why would he ask us to do something like that? We get some clue of why Jesus is telling this story if we look at Matthew 25:31-40 where he calls us to take care of everyone who needs to be taken care of. He says, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are the members of my family, you did it to me." It is in this command that we find out why we are to count all of humanity as our neighbor. All people are the children of God and the brothers and sisters of Jesus.

This is truly the challenge of being a Christian. We are called to love our neighbors as our self. Not just our next-door neighbor, not just the neighbors that we go to church with, not just the neighbors we like, but all of our neighbors. We are even supposed to love the people that hate us. God loves all of his children and he expects the same of us. I challenge all of you to think of ways to help all of your neighbors in need even if it involves going out of your comfort zone. Because when we show love to the children of God, then we are showing love to God.

Amen