

Luke 10:25-37
"Who is My Neighbor?"
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If there's one thing that Jesus taught his followers that defines who we are as Christians, it was what he called the "greatest commandment": You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. When Jesus said that to his followers, he had to have known how difficult it would be to live up to. Love God? Sure, we can do that. With all our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength? That's harder, but we certainly do try. Love our neighbors as ourselves? That's next to impossible. For starters, we don't always know who our "neighbors" even are. What does Jesus mean by that, anyway? Who am I supposed to love? Who is my neighbor?

One Wednesday night last Fall as I was driving home from Wonderful Wednesday and Room in the Inn, A.J., asked me about the people we sat with for dinner. He knew that they were strangers, but somehow they were different than other strangers we saw in other places. If you've helped with Room in the Inn before, you know that the homeless men and women who come to spend the night in our church are simply called "neighbors", so I told A.J.

that's who they are - neighbors. I also told him that I'd be coming back to church at four in the morning to help make breakfast for them. Surprisingly, he asked me to wake him up at bring him with me so that he could help. I said I would, not really believing that he would come with me. Then, at four in the morning I woke him up, and after taking a few seconds to rub the sleep from his eyes, A.J. jumped out of bed and got dressed. We came to church, and he helped make the breakfast and serve it to our neighbors. It surprised me how much he enjoyed it. As we were driving home, I turned into our neighborhood and apparently A.J. made a connection. He looked out at the houses that line our street and asked, "Daddy, are we going to make breakfast for all our neighbors?" I laughed, but then realized the seriousness of what he had asked. We had neighbors at church and neighbors at home, and ultimately Jesus calls us to simply serve and love our neighbors wherever we may be. One of the biggest problems facing the church today is that we mistake those people - our neighbors in all places - for strangers, and we are content to spend our lives content with being separate from them. As I pulled into my

driveway that morning, I thought, "Maybe we should be fixing breakfast for every neighbor we meet."

That thought contains at least an echo of our New Testament reading for this morning. It's traditionally called the parable of the Good Samaritan, but what prompts Jesus to tell the story is a question: A lawyer asks Jesus, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" That's an excellent question, and it's one that everyone asks sooner or later. Jesus knows that the lawyer has probably already figured it out for himself, so he answers the question with a question: "What does the law say?" The lawyer replies, "You shall love the Lord your God with heart, soul, strength, and mind—and your neighbor as yourself." That's something that everybody knew at that time. Everyone was familiar with the teaching of Judaism that connected loving God with loving neighbor. But even then, knowing the answer to the question only led to further questions. "But who exactly is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked. He wasn't the only one. Everyone in the Jewish world at the time had asked it, and they had already figured out that the law said that their neighbors were fellow Jews, people who were just like them.

Then came the parable. There was a man, a Jew, walking down the dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho. He was suddenly attacked, robbed, beaten, stripped naked, and left to die on the side of the road. The first to see him was a holy man, a priest, who wanted nothing to do with him and passed by on the other side of the road. Then a Levite, a temple leader, did the same thing: he saw the dying man and passed by on the other side of the road. The priest and the Levite were not bad people. They were simply doing what the law prescribed. Any contact with the dying man would have rendered them unclean, and so they kept to the other side of the road. The problem, of course, was that the prescriptions of the law were the only things they saw when they looked at the dying man. In truth, he was a neighbor in need. The priest and the Levite, however, mistook him for a stranger. Luckily the hated Samaritan came along to tend his wounds and feed him breakfast and be a neighbor to him. If I had thought of this parable the morning A.J. asked me whether we were going to make breakfast for the people in our neighborhood, I would have realized what an incredibly and distinctly Christian thought that is.

The notion of "neighbor" is an important one in Christian life and practice. When Jesus tells us to love our *neighbors*, he uses the word *plesion*, which comes from a root word meaning "near". In Jesus' teaching as well as in Christian life, a *neighbor* is anyone who is near to you, anyone who you encounter in your daily life. It's anyone you see face to face, anyone you pass by on the street, anyone who lives and works and plays and goes to school in your community. Neighbors can be those in need as well as those who need nothing. Neighbors are everywhere, and it's our unique and distinct calling to love *them* as we love ourselves. Sometimes that's easy. On other occasions, it's the hardest thing in the world, especially when the neighbor is someone I don't know or care to know, especially when I see that person day in and day out, and have become accustomed to simply ignoring them. I pass by on the other side because I call the neighbor a stranger.

A.J.'s question to me about the Room in the Inn neighbors made me realize that it's easy to minister to the neighbors who come to me. Room in the Inn is easy; the homeless neighbors come to me, they sit down without my having to invite them, they get their food without my having to serve them, and they spend the

night in a warm shelter that doesn't belong to me. Furthermore, they come to where I am. I don't have to go out and reach them (unless I drive the van), and that's easy ministry. There's no excuse not to do it. But you know, there are other neighbors. There are neighbors who are near to wherever I am. They are the ones who have no intention of coming to me, or coming to church, or sitting down for a meal with me. They are the ones I see up close every single day. Some of them have needs I'll never know. And those are the ones I'm content to pass by on the other side. The great paradox of Christian ministry is that too often the ones we pass by on the other side, are the ones who are closest to us. They are the "near-ones", and they are our neighbors.

I once read a story about Catherine Booth, who along with her husband founded the Salvation Army. Because of the work done by the Salvation Army, people followed her wherever she went. One of her friends once said that she was constantly attended by princes and peeresses and the poor. One night that same friend went with Mrs. Booth to a meeting, where she observed a great crowd of "publicans and sinners". After the meeting, Booth went to be entertained in the fine home of a wealthy socialite who had been

there. "My dear Mrs. Booth, that meeting was dreadful," the wealthy woman said.

"What do you mean, dearie?" asked Mrs. Booth.

"Oh, when you were speaking, I was looking at those people around me. Their faces were so terrible, many of them. I don't think I shall sleep tonight!"

"Why, dearie, don't you know them?" Mrs. Booth asked; and the hostess replied, "Certainly not!"

"Well, that is interesting," Mrs. Booth said. "They are your neighbors!"

Loving our neighbors as we love ourselves is so incredibly hard because our neighbors aren't just those who show up here on our doorstep. They are the ones living, and working, and learning in our community who have no interest in what we're doing here at all. Christian author Shane Claiborne wrote that it's not that we don't love our neighbors, but that we don't *know* our neighbors. If that's true, then maybe the great failing of the Christian church in our day and age isn't that we don't love my neighbors but that we don't know the *names* of my neighbors. Maybe the problem before us is

that we have routinely mistaken our brothers and sisters for strangers.

Whether or not you agree with that assessment, there are a number of Christians today who have turned toward a more missional mindset. That is to say, there's an increasing emphasis today on going out to reach others rather than just waiting on them to come to us. I once heard a very short and simple explanation of this *missional* church movement, and I'd like to share it with you.

It reads:

In the past, churches have spent large amounts of resources to construct the most attractive places imaginable in the community in which they were situated. Great music, compelling teaching, and a host of programs designed to gather people together were the staple of such church communities. Anyone who wanted to come was welcome, and church members were encouraged to invite their friends and neighbors. Generally, people had a pleasant experience. The people who came and were cared for seemed relatively similar. Education, incomes, past-times, race, struggles, and histories, seemed to be almost identical. Eventually, someone asked a question: what about all the people who aren't like us, the

people who live around us? Why aren't they here, too? In response, the church increased its marketing budget, direct-mailing the community, taking out ads in local papers, buying radio time, releasing a fresh web page, and offering to host the world's greatest event. The church was determined to be the center of everything great that happened in the community. Church members began to rely on the church to do the work of conveying God's story to the world. If someone could be brought to an event, then they could hear about Jesus from a professional teacher. Inviting people became synonymous with evangelism. A missional church, on the other hand, empowers its members to be the church in the community. The church trains, resources, encourages, and challenges its people to live out the good news in the community, and those who would otherwise be suspicious of a church and its marketing efforts. The church sends out its members to live among people unfamiliar with church customs, songs, and what it holds sacred, just like a foreign missionary. The missional church then recognizes that every believer embodies the life of the church in their neighborhood, at their school, or at their place of work, each

one of them telling God's story in the context of compassion, love, and genuine relationships.

Isn't that ultimately what we are called to do? Doesn't Jesus first and foremost expect us to go out into all the world and make disciples of everyone we meet, loving our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving our neighbors as we love ourselves? Doesn't our very identity as Christians depend on us being that kind of people?

On one hand, it's incredibly simple. Love our neighbors as we love ourselves. That's all we have to do. But on the other hand, nothing we do will be more difficult than that. The good news for us is that Jesus knew it would be that hard. He knew as soon as he said it that his followers would find it to be nearly impossible. But then he told a story about a traveler who was beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. Neither priest nor Levite would help him, but along came a Samaritan, who picked him up, bandaged his wounds, gave him shelter, and bought him food. It's hard to love like that. But love like that starts small. Loving your neighbors starts with just getting to know them. And it starts with just crossing the road.

It's that easy. And it's that hard.

Amen.