

Luke 10:25-37

10:25 An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

10:26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"

10:27 He answered, "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."

10:28 And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

10:29 But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

10:30 Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead.

10:31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.

10:32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

10:33 But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion.

10:34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

10:35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.'

10:36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

10:37 He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Sermon: Stay or Go?

In today's pericope, we delve into the meaning of neighbor. More specifically, we consider how to identify neighbors, and we also consider the behavior(s) that distinguish(es) neighborliness. Who is my neighbor? And how do neighbors act?

Let's start with the question of *who*.

The legalist can't help himself. He wants Jesus to speak in binary terms, to set firm boundaries, to live in a world of social constructions and classifications. But I believe, more than anything else, the legalist desires to use the law to privilege the love of God.

"And who is my neighbor?" he asks.

Jesus, realizing the tactic, refuses to recite more texts, refuses to engage in drawn out philosophical and theological arguments. Instead, Jesus tells a story. We hear about a priest, and then a Levite.

Amy Jill Levine reminds us of who is listening to this parable. Our audience is a faithful Jewish community. And who comprises this faithful Jewish community? Three groups: Priests, the direct descendants of Aaron, brother of Moses; Levites, descendants of Levi, a people also set apart as servants of God; And finally, Israelites, the remaining descendants born to the other children of Jacob.

The listener expects that the third traveler to pass the wounded man will be an Israelite, thus completing the subdivisions of this Jewish ecosystem. Therefore, the listener hardly expects to be introduced to a character they consider their sworn enemy, a Samaritan, one who has the audacity to worship God on a different mountain.

Jesus is signaling to his audience the need to expand their understanding of the realm and reach of God, and indeed, the very notion of neighbor. Jesus will not use the law to privilege a particular group of people, but instead, Jesus intends to use the law to remove any barriers to the receipt of God's love. Said another way, the legalist wants to use the law to funnel down, or isolate, or distinguish a particular set of neighbors. Jesus uses the law to eliminate distinctions. All humanity, indeed, all creation, is neighbor.

And how does a neighbor behave? How do they demonstrate their neighborliness?

57 years ago, on the evening before he was assassinated in Memphis, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his *I've Been to the Mountaintop*

speech. It's an exceptional speech, one I would encourage everyone to listen to. And housed within this speech is a short homily contemplating the meaning of the parable of the Good Samaritan. King's presentation is, I believe, the finest, most profound interpretation I've ever read, and King's words remain timeless and enduring nearly six decades later. I've linked the entire speech here, and the homily begins around 29:00.

Several items are particularly compelling about King's homily. He personalizes the dangers of the Jericho Road. King recalls driving the Jericho Road with his wife and noting the dramatic change in elevation. At its height in Jerusalem, the road's elevation is 2,500 feet above sea level. The road winds south, 17 very curvy miles, to Jericho, elevation 850 feet below sea level. A comparison for you. The distance between Marion, NC, elevation 1,400 feet and Black Mountain, NC, elevation 2,400 feet, is about 20 miles via I-40. That's a steep climb. There are lots of sharp curves. And it'll make your ears pop. When we talk about the Jericho Road, we're talking about a road three times as steep, and three times as curvy.

The Jericho Road is dangerous. It invites ambush. It may have been that the injured man was being deceitful. Setting a trap. It may have been that in the few minutes of aiding the wounded man, these other men would have risked meeting the same fate from robbers and scoundrels preying on vulnerable travelers. King offers a sense of empathy to the priest and the Levite who keep moving, because their decision is not irrational. They ask, "What's gonna happen to *us* if we stay here?" And it's not hard for them to deduce that danger is imminent.

King spends more time reflecting on the actions of the Samaritan, one whom he says understands the "I in Thou." When the Samaritan sees

the stranded neighbor, he doesn't ask, "What's gonna happen to *me* if I stay here?" Instead, he asks, "What's gonna happen to *him* if I don't?"

What are the qualities of neighborliness? Lived empathy – an awareness of the people around us – lived empathy, merged with active compassion – love that is felt, realized, and shared – active compassion. Neighbors merge lived empathy with active compassion. Neighbors acknowledge the ecosystems to which they belong, and resolve to be stewards, partners, and protectors of every inhabitant of that system. Mercy is never commoditized.

Again, I will tell you, I believe both Dr. King and Dr. Levine draw out helpful insight for navigating this parable in regard to how each of us can both identify neighbors and act neighborly on an individual basis. Yes, yes, yes, we must see the I in Thou.

But I can't help also reading this parable as a collective community of faith. And I am haunted by the question of "What's gonna happen to us if we stay here." What's gonna happen to our nation if we remain polarized by partisan rancor and politics? What's gonna happen to our souls if, we, like that legalist, sully the law and the love of God with constructs like racism, and classism, and nationalism, and sexism, and other isms that seek to distinguish that which is indistinguishable. In God's economy, in God's kin-dom, everyone is defined as human, as neighbor, and everyone is beloved, vital, and valued. What's gonna happen to our little church and our big-C Church if we keep insisting that our institutions, traditions, and expressions are unchangeable, irreversible, dogmatically-unflinchable? What's gonna happen if we insist our good creation has no room for creativity?

Make no mistake. Empathy. Compassion. Creativity. Innovation. Cooperation. Expansiveness. Inclusiveness. Humility. They are being bludgeoned every bit as much as that neighbor on the Jericho Road. We cannot stay in such a place. We cannot sustain this assault. But we also cannot leave – we cannot abandon the ecosystems we are called to steward.

And again, we must look to the parable. It could be we choose reform. It could be we choose reinvention. It could be we choose deconstruction, and eventually reconstruction. We will set our course. But before we do, we cannot, we will not abandon our most vulnerable neighbors. We must stay, for now, in order that we can all leave together. And we must build sanctuary, respite, recovery to convalesce from our woundedness. We must be Samaritans today, and innkeepers tomorrow and the next day, and the next. Empathy, compassion, and mercy must always remain our currency.

Yes, it's a daunting task. But to be fair, Jesus told many parables about neighbors, preached many sermons about neighboring, and spent a lifetime seeking to reveal the kinship of God. We move with urgency, but we must never forget we are buoyed by grace. The table in front of us is a good reminder.

We come, part of God's ecosystem, all welcome to receive what the banquet has to offer. We recognize, in this simple gesture, the radical hospitality of the Christ. Neighborliness without designation, mercy without expectation. And we hope, that when we leave this place, the table will travel with us, even to places like the Jericho Road.

Once there was a man, a Samaritan, a neighbor, and he offered mercy. May we go and do likewise. Amen.