

“Beyond Neighborly”  
Luke 10:25-37

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July 10, 2022; 10 Sunday in Ordinary Time

A lawyer wants to test Jesus, so he does what lawyers do. He asks Jesus a question. What must I do to inherit eternal life? That’s a good question. In order to live with God in a state of loving relationship, what should I be doing?

The lawyer asks his question. Jesus replies, “You’re a lawyer, what does the law say?” “Love the Lord your God with everything you’ve got and your neighbor as yourself.”

“OK. Yes. That’s what the law says. Get on with it.”

But the lawyer, who’s kind of embarrassed now, says, “But who is my neighbor?” Again, a good question. Who is my neighbor?

Most of us would say, a neighbor is someone to whom we are neighborly. We mow their lawn when they’re out of town. We wave at each other on our way to work. Maybe our kids play together. Friendly, but not close friends. Someone who’s in our circle, but not our inner circle.

But Jesus doesn’t say that. No. Jesus doesn’t define who our neighbor is. Jesus tells a story.

A man is on a trip. Remember, there’s no highway patrol back then. No state troopers monitoring the traffic and watching out for stolen donkeys. Even a busy road could be dangerous.

A man is on a trip. He’s set upon by thieves who beat him and rob him and strip him of all he has and leave him half dead. The man is in a very, very bad way.

A priest walks by but doesn’t stop. A Levite walks by but doesn’t stop. These are Temple bureaucrats. They administer the worship and sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem. All good Jews had an obligation to stop and help the man but particularly the religious leadership. It’s like the Pastor and the Worship Coordinator walk by and don’t even stop.

They don't help this man. He's not part of their family. He's not a close friend, part of their inner circle. But he is a fellow Israelite. He's a Jew, like them. Nevertheless, they walk on.

Then, a Samaritan comes by. The Samaritan looks at the Jew and see the enemy. The Samaritan looks at the Jew and he sees the enemy. The Samaritan sees a Russian soldier; he sees a Chinese spy. The Samaritan looks at the Jew and sees a South American drug lord, someone selling guns to criminals, a child pornographer.

What should he do? Spit on him? Kick him? Roll him over and see if he's lying on anything valuable? This man is the enemy.

But he doesn't. Instead, the Samaritan picks him up and dresses his wounds. Puts him on his own animal, which means he has to walk, and takes him somewhere where he can be cared for. Not only that, he promises to cover the bill.

Who was the neighbor? I think Jesus' point is anyone in distress is my neighbor. Anyone in distress is my neighbor. The person in the accident 3 cars ahead of me. The single parent who can't pay the electric bill. The illegal immigrant who will gladly work for less than minimum wage. The addict who will do anything, anything, for a fix. Who is my neighbor? Anyone in distress is my neighbor.

How do I respond to their distress? Not by watering their lawn or stopping for a chat. Being neighborly means using all the resources we have to help the person in distress. Being neighborly means using all the resources we have to help the person in distress.

Now, before we try to discount Jesus' message, before we start saying, "Jesus is using an extreme example to make a point," let's remember this is how God loves us. This is how God loves us.

God saw us, we who had rebelled against God, God saw us, lying half-dead in our sins. God sent Jesus to help us. Jesus picked us up and tended our wounds with his body and his blood. In the hospital of the church, we recover our strength.

God behaves towards us just like the Samaritan behaved towards the man by the side of the road. That means this is how we should love one another. We should love one another just as the Samaritan loved, just as God loves us.

Think about it this way, for just a moment. Jesus' sacrifice leads us to love God. Would my witness, would my lifestyle, lead someone to Jesus? Would the way I treat that person in distress make them think about being a Christian?

I have to tell you, if I were that Jew lying by the side of the road, beaten and robbed, stripped naked, half-dead, and I saw the priest go by without looking, and I saw the Levite go by without slowing down, and then a Samaritan stopped and bandaged my wounds and put me on his own animal and took me somewhere to get well, I have to tell you – I would seriously think about becoming a Samaritan. Wouldn't you?

Let me share a story. This is a true story.

In the mid-to-late 1980s, my parents were Southern Baptist missionaries in China. How they got there is a long story for another day. But in 1986, 87, that period, they were missionaries way out in western China.

One of their jobs was overseeing Journeyman missionaries who were there teaching English. It was a good program. The Baptists sent young people straight out of college to universities in China to teach English for two years. They taught English and lived a Christian lifestyle. It was a very subtle form of evangelism.

But remember, these folks are young. 22. 23. They do all the things 22 and 23-year-olds do, including taking unnecessary risks.

One day, one of the young Journeyman missionaries at a university way out in western China, goes rollerblading. He falls and breaks his hip. Seriously. He falls and breaks his hip.

The Southern Baptists have insurance, they can helicopter the young man to Hong Kong to get the best treatment possible. Hong Kong is still a British colony at this point. It is British and American hospitals. It even has a Baptist hospital. Care as good as you can find anywhere.

Dad oversees the program, so Dad is the one who has to approve it. Not a problem. One university picks up the phone and calls another university where Dad is. Not a problem.

But Dad's not in China. He's in Hong Kong at a missionary meeting. Now we're looking at an international call which back then is a lot more difficult. When they finally get through to the mission headquarters in Hong Kong and look for him, they find Dad's not there. He's gone to another mission meeting in Macau, a

Portuguese colony 40 miles away. More international phone calls. Of course, it all takes time.

Meanwhile, this poor man is lying in a hospital bed with a broken hip, waiting for a helicopter, but the doctors won't give him any pain medicine. They can't find his medical records. They don't know how he would respond to morphine. So, they do nothing.

Can you imagine? Lying there in a Chinese hospital. Your Chinese isn't very good. Their English isn't very good. You're not really sure what's going on. The pain is excruciating. And all you can do is lie there and wait. I would have been in tears.

It turns out this young missionary was friendly with the student head of the college Communists. He's sort of like the student head of the Young Democrats or College Republicans. He's a student, but the teacher's not much older. But the teacher's a Christian. And he's a communist.

What did he do? The head of the Young Communists went to the hospital to see the Christian missionary. And he sees the pain he's in. And he climbs up on the bed, holds the missionary in his arms, and stays there. He stays there. He stays there for hours until they finally track Dad down and explain the situation. Of course, Dad immediately said, "Yes! Do it!" The helicopter went and got him and took him to Hong Kong.

But all those hours, who's there holding him and comforting him? Who has gone beyond simple neighborliness? Who is caring for the person in distress with everything they've got? The head of the Young Communists.

If I were that Jew, lying by the side of the road, and that Samaritan came and helped me, I'd think about being a Samaritan. If I were that young missionary, lying in that hospital bed, and the head of the Young Communists was there helping me, I'd rethink my attitude towards Communism.

Who is my neighbor? Who is my neighbor? Anyone in distress. Anyone. Even my worst enemy. That's clear enough.

But the next time we are called on to be neighborly, the next time we are called on to be neighborly, will someone see us and think about becoming a Christian? Amen.