

*“Welcome to the Neighborhood”*  
Meditation on Luke 10: 10:25–37  
July 10, 2016  
Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

*Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” 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.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 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.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him kindness.” Jesus said to him, “Do this and you shall live.”*

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We sat around tables in the fellowship hall, like we usually did, after worship on Sunday about, oh, 15 months ago. I was serving a church in rural Minnesota. A man, who was not usually unkind, started telling jokes about Native Americans. Some of his audience, lingering over black coffee and cookie bars, wore guilty smiles. Some let out loud guffaws, while sending me sideways glances. They knew how I felt. They were not pleased with the mission trip I was planning with another church to Spirit Lake Tribal Nation Aug. 5 - 9 last year. We were planning to teach an Outback-themed VBS at a community center and serve one full meal and snacks each day. Native Americans living on Reservations have some of the worst levels of poverty and

unemployment in America;, they report the highest rates of substance abuse and dependence of any ethnic group; 46% of Native American women have been victims of abuse. Children often live in single parent households or the parents are absent altogether--having left the Reservation; many grandparents are raising grandchildren.

Local churches on the reservation, in nearby Devil's Lake, ND, and in other parts of the country are responding to this mission field, reaching out with love and kindness, supplying food, clothing, toys and school supplies, friendship and faith--revealing the God of mercy who sent His Son to redeem and heal a broken world. We learned of these ministry opportunities at Spirit Lake Indian Reservation through the PC(USA) Website and Joe Obermeyer, a youth pastor from Bdecan Presbyterian Church, one of the churches on the Reservation.

Few families on the Reservation of about 6,600 people attend church, but parents will drop their kids off for VBS. They see it as a safe place, free food for their kids, and "free daycare." I had never led a mission trip or VBS before going to Spirit Lake. But when we learned of the children in need, the 20 or so people on our mission team who traveled to the Reservation were moved to compassion! We had to DO something to bring hope and joy and the peace of Christ. We were determined to go, despite the disapproval of some who didn't believe that VBS on an Indian Reservation would make a difference. It was a waste of time and money that could spent in their own community.

When we arrived at the Tokio community center where we would host VBS, members of Devil's Lake Presbyterian church showed up with a picnic meal after our 6 to 8 hour drive. But I looked around at the un-

air-conditioned building, the flies, the dirt, and the mugshots of local sex offenders barred from the premises, and I had my misgivings.

I thought, "Welcome to the neighborhood."

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The Good Samaritan story is perhaps one of the most familiar passages of the New Testament. It has become a cliché. Everybody knows that a Good Samaritan is someone who comes to the aid of a stranger. Sermons often focus on the stranger who helps the Jewish man, who was beaten, robbed, and left for dead by the side of the road. The one who helps is of a different faith, culture and ethnic group that happens to be an enemy of the Jewish people in Jesus' time. Obviously, this point is important to Luke because the word for Samaritan is placed at the beginning of the Greek sentence for emphasis. The noun (subject) usually follows the verb and can even be at the end of the sentence or omitted altogether. Jews and Samaritans begin their mutual contempt in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE when the Assyrian conquest of Israel leads to the forced migration of foreign peoples into Samaria, the ancient capital, now on Israel's West Bank. We see evidence of the adversarial relationship in the chapter that precedes this passage. In Luke 9, a Samaritan town refuses to receive Jesus on his way to Jerusalem; James and John want to call down fire from heaven on them, but Jesus rebukes them. (9:51-56). Some preachers focus on the self-absorbed, uncaring so-called religious people who pass by the suffering man and do nothing.

What intrigues me is **why** Jesus is saying all this--and what it means

for us! He is speaking not with his disciples, but a hostile man called a “lawyer” in the NRSV, but he is really a scribe-- an expert in the interpretation of Mosaic law. He knows the Torah! We know he’s hostile because in verse 25 he stands up “to test” Jesus, asking a question that puzzles me. He says, “What must I do to *inherit* eternal life?” Friends, what do we have to do to “inherit” anything? Nothing! It’s a gift from a relative after they die. It’s a trick question, an open challenge to the authority and insight of this Galilean without any credentials as a “Teacher” of the law, which is exactly what the man calls Jesus, probably without sincerity! Jesus answers with a question. “What is written in the law (the Torah)? What do you read there?” Or as some translators say, “**How** do you read it?” The scribe answers with 2 verses from the Torah, connected and slightly changed. He adds *dianoia* -- “mind” to Deut. 6:5, the command to love God with all heart, soul and might. And then he leaves out part of Leviticus 19:18, which is, in full, <sup>18</sup> “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your *own people*, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.” Yes, that specific verse does refer to loving your own kin and community--which is the scribe’s point, when he asks Jesus, trying to “justify” himself by only caring about his own people, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus answers by telling a story of a man moved by compassion to give of himself, his time, and his possessions for a man who isn’t his kin or from his community, a man that the scribe would think of as his enemy. Then Jesus asks, “Which of these three, do you think, **was a neighbor** to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

The scribe answers, “The one who showed kindness.” “Do this,” Jesus

commands, “and **you** shall live.”

What is the whole point of this exchange between Jesus and the know-it-all-scribe? Jesus wants to teach the hostile man that to love God and neighbor and to walk in the path of eternal life means being kind and compassionate to all. Jesus is also teaching us --and all the generations who hear God’s Word and take it to heart--to be kind and show compassion to all people. And just as importantly, Jesus is urging us to model and teach kindness and compassion to those who are hostile to the *radical inclusivity of the gospel*. The love and grace of God aren’t just for white people, Americans, Christians, English speakers, heterosexuals and people of a certain political party. John 3:16 assures us that God’s gift of eternal life through His Son is for ALL the world that God so loves!

The question is never, “**Who is my neighbor?**” For everyone is our neighbor, especially someone who needs our help, someone whom God places in our path. The question is always, “***How can I be a neighbor*** and show love and compassion, like Christ has shown for me?”

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The first day of our VBS at Spirit Lake was pretty much a disaster--or at least it felt that way. The children were wild, unruly and uncooperative. They wouldn’t sit still. They wouldn’t sing. They were used to running around and playing with balls in the space that we had turned into centers for music, games, crafts and Bible. The only thing they seemed to be interested in was eating. They were hungry! We never had leftovers, not even salad! The kids ate everything on their

plates or they took their plates and drinks home with them, carrying them around till it was time to go.

But on the second day, things changed. Maybe we had changed in our expectations. Maybe the Lord was just testing our faith. All the children came back. And more came! We served more than 50 children over 4 days, ending the program with a family program and ice cream social. The children came in like little lambs, put on their nametags without a fuss, and waited in line, without pushing and shoving.

We met the children at the door, surprising them by greeting them by name, with affection, despite their unruliness the day before. They responded to the simple kindness and generosity of strangers, who talked funny, had different colored hair and really white skin--or at least, some of us did. They hugged, laughed and sang with us, eagerly memorized their Bible verse with the motions and volunteered to recite it. They held our hands and climbed into our laps and onto the shoulders of their crew leaders. Yes, praise God, it was, "Welcome to the neighborhood."

Let us pray.

Holy One, we praise you for the work you are doing in our hearts and lives! Thank you for Jesus and for your Spirit that convicts us of our sin of prejudice. Forgive us for being unkind to even our own kin and community and our lack of compassion for people of different faiths and cultures that may frighten or bewilder us. Forgive us for holding onto our money and possessions, rather than using all that we are and all

that we have to build up your Kingdom and your Church. Help us to love you with all heart, soul, mind and might. Lead us to love our neighbors as ourselves and to change the world with our words and deeds-- so that the oppressed go free, and children are nurtured in your ways --and never go hungry for food or love. Let justice flow down like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! In Christ we pray. Amen.