

Today, we get one of the most familiar of Jesus' stories: the parable of the Good Samaritan. It's one of those stories where we think we already know the point....Be nice. Help people. Don't be like the priest or the Levite keeper of the Temple. Be like the Samaritan.

And sure, that's not wrong. But what else is Jesus getting at? Because we know there's always something more.

The story starts with a religious lawyer asking Jesus, "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" And Jesus, being Jesus, answers his question with a question: "*What's written in the law?*"

The man answers with something all of us know — *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.*

Jesus says, "*Good. Do that, and you'll live.*"

But the man isn't satisfied. He wants to know: *Who counts?* Who qualifies as my neighbor? Perhaps he's looking for an out??? Well... let's give him the benefit of the doubt.

But instead of giving a legal definition, Jesus tells a story. (Of course he does.)

A man is robbed and left for dead on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Two religious leaders — the people you'd expect to help — walk right past. The man lies there until a Samaritan, someone Jesus' audience would have expected to avoid the man, stops. He is the one who sees, the one who draws near, the one who cares.

That's the twist in the story. The Samaritan doesn't just stop — he *lets himself be moved*.

That's the part I keep coming back to. The Samaritan sees, feels, and acts. He sees the man not as an interruption or a risk or a moral test. He sees him as a human being. And he lets that vision stir compassion and action in him.

Now here's something important to know: Jews and Samaritans shared common ancestry, but centuries of theological and political tension had driven a deep wedge between them. Samaritans worshipped on Mount Gerizim instead of in Jerusalem and had their own version of the Torah. By Jesus' time, there was open hostility. They avoided each other, distrusted each other, and saw one another as outsiders — even enemies.

So when Jesus makes a Samaritan the hero of the story — the one who truly loves his neighbor — it's no casual choice. We know this. **Jesus doesn't make casual choices.** Every part of this parable is deliberate. He's pressing a nerve. He's saying: "*Your neighbor is the one you think you can't love. The one you've been taught to fear or dismiss.*"

It's not just a story about kindness. It's a stark, prophetic challenge — to see with new eyes, to love beyond boundaries, and to let the "other" teach us something about the heart of God.

And we all know, it can be hard to do.

I mean, there's a reason we had to write Good Samaritan laws, laws that protect people from being sued when they step in to help someone in crisis. Think about that. In our world, mercy is something we have to *legally protect*.

It's a strange irony, isn't it? We needed to write compassion into the legal code. That trying to save a life might put someone at risk. So we passed laws to say, "It's okay. You won't be punished for doing the right thing."

It's a telling moment. Because it says something about the culture we live in — that at times, even kindness feels dangerous. That helping might require legal backup.

And yet Jesus says, "*Do this, and you will live.*"

He doesn't say, "Do this if it's safe." Or "Do this if it's comfortable." Or "Do this when there's no fear of reprisal." He simply says: *Love your neighbor*.

And boy, that word "neighbor" — it just keeps getting more radical the longer we sit with it, doesn't it?

Because Jesus doesn't define neighbor by geography, or shared religion, or political party, or legal status. He defines neighbor by proximity to suffering, and our response to it.

Which brings us to Amos. In our first reading, the prophet sees a vision: God is holding a plumb line — a tool used to measure whether a wall is straight — and says, "*I'm setting this in the midst of my people Israel.*"

And it turns out the wall is leaning. The people are out of alignment. Amos is sent to speak truth — to say that the fancy altars and strong armies and a booming economy don't mean a thing if the poor are crushed, and the powerful refuse to be corrected.

Amos isn't a professional. He's a shepherd. A fig farmer. But he knows injustice when he sees it. And when the priest of Bethel tries to silence him — tells him to go back to where he came from — Amos says, "I'm no prophet. I'm not trained for this. But God took me and said, 'Go speak.' So here I am."

Sometimes being a neighbor means showing up even when it's not your job. Sometimes it means getting into trouble — good trouble.

Congressman John Lewis knew that well. As we approach the anniversary of his death on July 17, there are vigils and gatherings happening right here in Westfield and across the country to remember his call: "*Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.*"

He also said this:

"You are a light. You are the light. Never let anyone — any person or any force — dampen, dim, or diminish your light."

We see that light today in the Samaritan. He refused to let indifference — or fear — extinguish his light. He chose to be guided by compassion, not custom. He chose to be a neighbor.

And that's what Amos did. And what John Lewis did. And what we are called to do — even now, especially now.

Because, as Presiding Bishop Sean Rowe recently wrote in an OpEd for Religion News Service:

"We (The Episcopal Church) were once the church of the Founding Fathers and presidents... Today, however, we are known less for the powerful people in our pews than for our resistance to the rising tide of authoritarianism and Christian nationalism."

He continues:

"Our recent reckonings..... have allowed us to see clearly the ease with which the Protestant tradition of patriotism can lead Christians to regard our faith more as a tool of dominion than a promise of liberation."

That line has stayed with me: *"More as a tool of dominion than a promise of liberation."*

That's what happens when we twist God's law. When we use it to control, exclude, or dominate — instead of to heal and lift and love.

And Bishop Rowe is honest about our history as a church. We failed to oppose slavery and even supported it. We removed Indigenous children from their homes and ran boarding schools to indoctrinate them. And now, he says, we are once again being faced with a choice — *"between the demands of [power] and the teachings of Jesus."*

And then comes the line we need to hear:

"That is no choice at all."

Now, I want to pause here, because I know there may be some of us feeling a little uneasy. I feel uneasy these days as a citizen and pastor. Some of this might sound *political*. I get that. We live in a time when almost everything feels political — when the mention of law or justice or power can set off alarm bells.

But let me say this clearly and with love: **this isn't about party or platform. This is about people. This is about our neighbors.** This is about the Gospel.

If someone had pulled Jesus aside after he told this story and said, "You know, that Samaritan stuff sounds kind of political," I imagine he would've smiled and said, "Love will always sound political in a world that's bent on power instead of mercy."

Jesus didn't avoid the hard questions of his time. He didn't keep his compassion private. He healed on the Sabbath. He dined with the wrong people. He touched the untouchable. He told stories that turned the social order upside down — and then told people to go and do likewise.

So if today's Gospel feels a little uncomfortable, that's okay. That just means it's doing its work.

And let's not name it "political" to dismiss it. Let's call it **discipleship**. Because that's what it is.

So this week, I invite you to look around:

Where are you being called to stop and *really* see?

Where is the law of love calling you to step into risk, rather than to stay safe?

And if it feels hard, good. That means you're on the road.

John Lewis once said:

"If not us, then who? If not now, then when?"

So let's go out and be neighbors. Let's stop, see, act, and love.

And when someone asks you why you got involved, why you spoke up, why you bothered, just tell them the truth:

"Because Jesus told me to love my neighbor."

Amen.