

“Coming Near to Our Neighbors”

Sermon by Lisa Crismore

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Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 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 mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

When I was growing up, my favorite television shows were Cowboy Bob, Popeye and Janie and Captain Kangaroo. I thoroughly enjoyed them as a child. But, when my baby brother, Jason, was born 13 years and 11 months after me, there was a whole new programming for children offered. Sesame Street was one of those shows. It was not only entertaining but it offered educational value as well.

Many times the segments would have a catchy song. One of the songs I remembered was “Who Are the People in Your Neighborhood?” It goes something like this:

Oh, who are the people in your neighborhood, in your neighborhood, in your neighborhood?
Oh, who are the people in your neighborhood, the people who you meet, when you are walking down the street, the people that you meet each day?

One of the cast members of Sesame Street would be singing this to a puppet who would be dressed up like a librarian, plumber, doctor, letter carrier – postal worker and/or cable man. They would go on to sing a verse of the song that explained who they are, what they do in their profession and how they help serve others.

We hear today the parable in the Gospel of Luke of the “Good Samaritan.” We may have heard this story as children in Vacation Bible School or Sunday morning church school. It is very familiar to many of us. We hear Jesus answer the question, “Who is our neighbor?”

There is a man who is traveling on a street from Jerusalem heading to Jericho. He meets on the street or road some not very nice people in his desert neighborhood. They are robbers! They beat him, strip him, and leave him on the side of the road, barely alive.

Now, Jesus have three men to pass by this man. Two of them, a priest and a Levite, pass by at separate times. They are prominent people in the Jewish faith community. They come a long, see their Jewish brother in need and both decide to cross to the other side of the road. They decide to ignore the injured man.

We don’t really know why these men behave the way they do. They **should** drop everything and come near to their Jewish brother in need. What creates this distance? Are they too busy? Do they just not want to be bothered? Are they afraid to get involved? Did they think that no one was

watching and they could get by with this? Were they suffering from compassion fatigue and need to think about their self-care? Or did they recognize him as the man in their temple who is always causing problems and they don't like very much?

Whatever the case is, these men move on. Then Jesus introduces the most unlikely person to help the bloody, Jewish man - **a Samaritan!** A Samaritan comes near to the man and helps him by cleaning and bandaging his wounds. He comes near, puts his arm around his neck and hoists him up onto his animal. He comes near and takes him to a place of refuge. He comes near and gives money for his care, which is equivalent to wages for two days. He comes near and returns to see how he is doing and pay more if there is more owed for his care.

The Samaritan people hate the Jewish people. A Samaritan, because of religious and political reasons, cannot stand to be around Jewish people. Samaritans are supposed to distance themselves from Jews at all times. They are not to be nice to each other! And yet, the Samaritan comes near. The Samaritan comes near and overlooks all the reasons of why he should NOT help this man. Jesus chooses a Samaritan to teach us "who is our neighbor?"

Karoline Lewis, a professor of Theology and author says, "Who is my neighbor?" means, according to Jesus, a commitment to coming near. Your neighbor is not just the person living next door - in a house you never have to enter, into which you might never be invited, to who you never have to speak. Your neighbor is not one who happens to be convenient for you to help. Your neighbors are not those whom you can keep in their place.

Your neighbor is someone who, without a doubt, is experiencing pain, struggles, challenges, and sorrow, and yet to who you draw near. Your neighbor is someone who clearly has needs and you decide - I will help you. Your neighbor is someone who might even resist your assistance but you insist on it anyway."(The Need for Nearness by Karoline Lewis - Craft of Preaching - Working Preacher; 2016; www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4685)

I find it interesting that this scripture is offered in the lectionary when our church is doing so much outreach and coming near to our neighbors. Our congregation has just finished Vacation Bible School, which we did in partnership with Iglesia Hermandad Cristiana. Our youth group has just returned from reaching out to our neighbors in New Albany and helped with home refurbishing through Habitat for Humanity. Two weeks from now, we will gather together at Meadowood Park to worship outside the walls of our church welcoming our neighbors to worship with us. Later on, our youth will be commissioned for their time at Triennium, which starts this next week. This will be a time for them to learn from their fellow Presbyterian neighbors as they gather together for this national gathering. It is true that we come near to our neighbor because Jesus tells us to "Go and do likewise."

This coming near stretches us because it can be risky when we draw near to our neighbor. Yet, the fruit from our labors can be so rich! I want to share a story with you that Bere Gil Soto shared with me from her week at soccer camp, which was held here at John Knox.

Some of you might know, Crystal Marshall, she has brought her two children over the years to our Easter Festivals, VBS and Fall Festivals even though she is a member at the Blended Church. Last year, she told me that she wanted to help this year at VBS and to call her, so I did. She was Julie Pratt's assistant teacher. Some of you might know, Juanita Medina. She was a member of Iglesia Nueva Creacion and now a member of Hermandad Cristiana. Juanita helped with crafts and registration this year at VBS. During the week of soccer camp, Juanita was inside sorting and straightening the donated clothes, which people sift through and take. She felt the need to go outside and visit with others. When she went outside, she saw Crystal sitting by herself. She decided to go over and give her a hug. This act of coming near brought Crystal to tears.

Juanita took out her phone and started typing and then she handed it to Crystal. Crystal typed something and then handed it back to Juanita. This went on for some time. Come to find out they were using “Google translate”, which is an app on phones that helps you communicate when you don’t know that person’s language. They were communicating. Juanita was offering comfort to Crystal.

Bere had witnessed this out of the corner of her eye. Later, she asked Juanita about this when she went to go take her home. Juanita said it was a God moment! God had connected these two unlikely women together. Two women, who don’t speak the same language, who come from different backgrounds and cultures, who neither one officially are a part of John Knox, coming near as neighbors giving comfort and support. In the moment when they came near to each other, God came near!

This God moment, I believe is something that you as a congregation **and God** have cultivated. Many churches out there would not have allowed Crystal to teach since she was not a member. I know we welcomed others like Crystal. Our church could have told Iglesia Hermandad Cristiana that they could not have their soccer camp here. Iglesia Nueva Creación has joined them and is now worshipping at Westview Christian church. So there is no reason for them to be here. But, we did do that! We said of course you can have soccer camp here. We don’t care about the wear and tear on the building or the insurance risks of someone getting injured. The ministry that we do together in partnership is far more important! It has taken awhile to get here.

What I want to say about this is please never, never, never stop being an Open. Caring. Community! Please don’t only do God’s work here at John Knox! Do it in your homes, in your work, in the stores, on the phone, in school, when you are walking down the street with the people that you meet! Because being a neighbor, cultivating fertile ground for God to come near in those God moments, is far too important!

Thanks be to God for Jesus and his amazing parables that stretches and teach us how to live! Amen.