Luke 10:25-37

 Neighbor Love

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Luke 10:25-37
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Yesterday, some of us participated in an Art of Neighboring conference at our church. The opening exercise was to make a chart of the eight homes or condos situated closest to where we live. We were asked to identify by name the people who live in these homes and any relevant information we know about them.

As we engaged in this exercise, I could feel the resistance welling up in me. Don’t make me do this. Okay, Mr. Speaker, you’ve made your point. I don’t really know some of my neighbors.

I’m a decent neighbor, but nobody special. I’ve justified my lack of neighborliness any number of ways. Usually, it all comes down to busyness. I’m really busy, you know. Somehow, I don’t think Jesus is all that impressed with my busyness. Really, you’re too busy to keep my great command?

Our story from Luke’s gospel centers on a lawyer, of all people. How appropriate, given that our metro area is flush with attorneys. This lawyer asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (10:25). His inquiry presupposes there is actually something he can do to inherit eternal life. Surely the lawyer knows how it works, that inheritance is at the discretion of the giver not the receiver.

Jesus never answers the lawyer’s question. Instead, he turns the question back on the man: “What is written in the law? How do you read it?” (10:26).

You’ve got to hand it to this lawyer; he fields Jesus’ questions cleanly. He cites two passages from the Torah about, “Loving the Lord with all your heart, soul, strength and mind,” (Deuteronomy 6:5) and “loving our neighbors as ourselves” (Leviticus 19:18). Earlier, Jesus summarized the law in identical fashion. Either this lawyer has heard Jesus speak on the subject or has independently reached the same conclusion.

The lawyer, now wanting to justify himself, asks Jesus a related question: “Who is my neighbor?” (10:29). Circle this phrase “wanting to justify himself.” We’ll come back to it a few moments from now.
Jesus answers his question by telling a story. Once upon a time, a man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. This 17 mile stretch of highway, called the “Bloody Way,” was a notorious hideout for bandits. Sure enough, thugs rob this unsuspecting man and leave him in a ditch by the side of the road.

A priest comes upon this distressed man, but keeps his distance. Perhaps he’s suspicious that this mugging has been staged to trick him into being robbed. Maybe he thinks that the man in the ditch has already died. It would be a no-no for a priest to touch a corpse. Or maybe he’s just late for temple duties. Whatever the reason, this priest keeps right on walking.

Next, a Levite comes onto the same crime scene. A Levite is a religious high roller in his own right who is responsible for temple worship. This lawyer must be thinking, ‘Surely this Levite will come to the man’s rescue.’ Yet, it’s the same story, second verse. The Levite does nothing to help either.

This lawyer is probably thinking Jesus has an anti-clerical objective up his sleeve. Perhaps a Jewish commoner will come along to save the day. Yet, here’s the clincher: “But a Samaritan came near him…and was moved with pity,” Jesus tells him (10:33).

Jews and Samaritans were bitter enemies. Samaritans were considered rogue Jews. They intermarried with Gentiles, refused to worship at the Jerusalem temple and disagreed over what portions of Scripture had authority for God’s people. A Good Samaritan would be a contradiction in terms since the only Good Samaritan would be a dead Samaritan. Yet, it’s the Samaritan who dresses the man’s wounds, puts him on his donkey, accompanies him to the Jericho Inn and pays for his lodging.

Jesus concludes his story with a question: “Which of the three was a neighbor to the man?” (10:36). Our lawyer in question supplies the only possible answer. He can’t quite bring himself to utter the name Samaritan, so he says, “The one who shows him mercy.” Bingo! “Go and do likewise” (10:37).
It’s tempting to treat this Good Samaritan parable as an Aesop’s Fable type of story. You know; Jesus simply wants us to act like the Good Samaritan and be more neighborly. Beware, my friends! This parable has a real kick to it. Remember, this lawyer asks about Jesus’ definition of neighbor love to justify himself. It’s hard to resist the temptation to want to justify ourselves. We don’t want our actions to be misinterpreted, so we invest inordinate amounts of time trying to justify ourselves.

The psychological term for this justification is called “cognitive dissonance.” I hold certain beliefs to be true. Yet, when I do something to violate these core beliefs, it creates cognitive dissonance in me since there’s discrepancy between what I know to be true and what I actually do. So, I try to lessen the dissonance by justifying my actions. I’m tempted to believe the lie rather than face up to the uncomfortable truth.

Let’s say Mr. So-and-So professes to love his wife, but he also cheats on her. His behavior creates dissonance in him, since he places value on honoring his marital vows. So, to cope with the dissonance, he jumps on flaws in his wife in order to justify his own reckless behavior. Or suppose Ms. What’s-Her-Name has reached the point where she can no longer trust a longtime friend. When her friend does something nice for her, it creates dissonance in Ms. What’s-Her-Name. So, she tries to justify the kindness by rationalizing that her friend has acted this way only to make herself look good.

Jesus tells this Good Samaritan parable to counter any attempt on the part of this lawyer to justify himself. This lawyer wants to tinker with the definition of neighbor and narrow the scope to people who share his culture and customs. Jesus wants to widen it to include Samaritans and other foreigners.

According to the research, Americans are more isolated than ever. How ironic, given the boon in technology and social media. Yet, in this post 9/11 world, a culture of suspicion has become firmly entrenched. Americans are increasingly retreating to our homes to hang out with people just
like us. The fear factor makes us wary toward strangers. Children are not the only ones afflicted with stranger danger.

Who is my neighbor? Answer: anyone who is near. The issue for Jesus is one of proximity, not ethnicity and religion. The Greek word Jesus employs for neighbor in this Good Samaritan parable literally translates, “one who is near.” We are called to love those who are nearby. Our neighbor is someone sitting on the subway next to us or those who occupy the next cubicle at work or the family who lives next door. Oh, no, not those people! You expect me to love that neighbor with the barking dog or who hasn’t yet figured out how to disable his car alarm? You want me to love that employee who talks too much or clips his fingernails at staff meetings? Yes, those people! I’m reminded of something Linus said in Peanuts years ago: “I love mankind; its people I can’t stand.”

Jesus is not merely talking about loving people in the abstract. He’s talking about loving real people with actual names. This is where life gets messy. We don’t have to like such people. But we do need to love them.

There’s a quote in the book, *The Art of Neighboring*, that I commend to you. “We don’t love our neighbors to convert them; we love our neighbors because we are converted.” The authors make a distinction between ulterior and ultimate motives. When we love neighbors for the sole purpose of telling them about Jesus, we love them with ulterior motives. This is a far different from being in relationship with neighbors with whom we can talk naturally about matters of ultimate concern.

Our lawyer in question is engaged in a dead-end pursuit to justify himself. Scripture declares we can never justify ourselves before God. Paul states categorically, in his epistles, that we will never be vindicated by good works alone. We are justified solely by God’s grace through Jesus Christ which we receive in faith. So, let’s stop trying to justify ourselves and accept the fact that we are vindicated by God’s grace.

Our lawyer friend would have fared better had he raised the white flag and admitted that he hasn’t done a great job loving his neighbor—not when it extends to despised Samaritans and dreaded foreigners. Maybe
we’re better served to admit that we haven’t done a good job at loving our neighbors. Maybe we need to ask Jesus to help us love people we don’t like.

Maybe it all comes down to whether we are teachable. Can we take correction? Can we receive criticism without becoming defensive?

It’s wasn’t long ago that the local sports media was speculating whether the demise of the Redskins was attributable to coach Mike Shanahan or that quarterback RGIII wasn’t very coachable. Are you coachable?

I recall a Taoist story about the student who approaches his master and asks him to teach him. The master invites his apprentice student to sit and have tea with him. The master begins to converse with this eager student. But every time the master tries to explain something, the student interrupts him. This student is so eager to tell his master what he already knows that the master can hardly get a word in edge-wise. The master stops talking, picks up the teapot and pours tea into the student’s cup. The master keeps pouring until the student’s cup is filled to overflowing. The student pleads with the master to stop. “It’s enough,” the student tells him, “My cup is full.” The master responds, “Yes, your cup is full. I can teach you nothing until you empty your cup.”

We need a beginner’s mindset. Fill my cup, Lord. I’m weary of trying to justify myself. Help me love my neighbors.