

## “Identifying Our Neighbors”

OT 15C-16

Luke 10: 25-37

July 14, 2019

### “Identifying Our Neighbors”

What a week! What a week as almost 50 children, over 20 youth, and just about 30 adults came together to explore God’s love of Creation and *all* God’s creatures.

The week was a blast. Jenness and the spectacular team of leaders gave our kids an amazing camp experience, from the games and rec to the swimming in the stream to the music and singing to the arts and crafts to the acting out Bible stories in the “Telling Tent.”

It all came together beautifully as our children got to more fully explore the blessings of God’s creation as they spent time *in* God’s creation.

Now, it may be a bit obvious that campers explored our first Scripture lesson this morning from Genesis 1. But at the Telling Tent, led by Carol Appleby, campers also explored other Bible stories with important Creation themes. Like the story of Noah and the Ark... and how important it is that we—God’s children—take care of God’s creatures.

They also explored the story of Jonah and the big fish, and the time Jesus took the disciples fishing and their nets overflowed with fish... both illustrative of the power of God’s grace at work within the world.

But I was particularly taken by the lesson Carol shared at the “Telling Tent” on Tuesday, as they explored the story of Moses confronting the Egyptian Pharaoh, sending plagues of frogs and lice and flies and locusts—the kind of creatures that aren’t so easy or pleasant to care for. And then they acted out the story of Daniel in the Lion’s Den... and the truth that, admittedly, some of God’s creatures are just easier to love. As they read in the book, “Pets I Wouldn’t Pick,” a children’s book illustrated by Carol’s sister—how neat is that!—campers dug into the truth that some of God creatures just aren’t so huggable, you know? Like mosquitos. Why God made mosquitos is beyond me.

But the same truth holds with people, too, as campers made the connection that there are some people in God’s world who are easy to love, and some who are harder. There are those who are huggable and those who seem entirely unhuggable. And yet, still... God loves all of God’s amazing creatures... and asks us to do the same!

It’s a lesson I’m grateful my son and all our kids were able to explore.

It’s a lesson I’m proud this church proclaims. God calls us to love *all* of creation.

But to be honest, this theme of loving the less huggable parts of Creation... the theme of identifying who we are and who we aren’t called to love... it’s been running through my head a lot lately... not just because of Camp BeeTree but because of all that’s going on in our world right now.

And amid the pain of it all, we hear the world insist we can’t love ‘em all, right? Some don’t deserve our care, while other people’s pain simply isn’t our concern.

But what I want to know is how can we tell? In an increasingly global society that confronts us not only with folks in our neighborhood but those half a world away, how can we identify who God calls us to care for?

Well, of all the lessons the lectionary might give us this week—the lectionary is what gives preachers the lessons from which we preach each week—this morning we’re given the parable of the Good Samaritan. One of Scripture’s best known stories.

Most have heard it before... but I need to tell you, if you’ve never been offended or convicted by Jesus’ words here, then you probably haven’t heard it *fully* just yet.

As Luke tells it, a lawyer asked Jesus a clear, straightforward question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

It’s a question we’ve all asked in some fashion before.

“What must I do to make sure I get into heaven?”

Or, “Lord, what must I do to uncover fullness of life in the here and now?”

But Jesus knew the lawyer already had the answer. “You’re a smart guy. You tell me?”

The lawyer quoted the Golden Rule from Deuteronomy back to Jesus. “You shall love the Lord your God with all you are and all you have. And love your neighbor as yourself.”

“You got it,” Jesus said. “Do this, and you’ll uncover the keys to life.”

But the lawyer wasn’t satisfied. “And who is my neighbor? Just who, exactly, am I expected to love?”

Frederick Buechner, one of my favorite authors, says the lawyer probably “wanted a legal definition he could refer to... Something on the order of: ‘A neighbor (hereinafter referred to as the party of the first part) is to be construed as meaning a person of Jewish descent—of Hebrew lineage—whose legal residence is within a radius of no more than three statute miles from one’s own legal residence...’”<sup>1</sup>

It makes sense, right? We need to define what constitutes a neighbor.

Are neighbors defined geographically? Do we love the ones we’re near?

Or are neighbors determined not by geography, but ethnicity or perhaps religion? Do we love the ones we’re like? Do we love the ones who believe what we do?

Jesus said, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho where he was mugged. He was robbed, beaten, and left for dead on the side of the road.

“Now by chance a priest was going down that road; but when he reached the man, he crossed to the other side and just kept on walking. Then a Levite—a particularly religious Hebrew—happened to stroll by; but he too crossed over and walked on by.”

Now the *easy* thing to do here is cast judgment, right? Both the priest and the Levite were Jewish leaders within the temple, each in charge of their own sacred rites and responsibilities. “How could a religious leader walk on by?”

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 281.

But it's never as simple as it seems. In the Jewish tradition, priests and Levites were *not* allowed to touch a corpse. It would've made them "impure."

Plus, there was no guarantee the man in the ditch was who he appeared to be. Couldn't this have been some elaborate booby-trap?

But even more to the point, let's get real. How many of us give to each beggar on the street corner? Who here hasn't walked on by someone in need... honestly?

Jesus continued. "Then a *Samaritan* happened to be walking down the road and noticed the guy lying there, all beat up and left for dead." A Samaritan.

And with that, the lawyer's ears perked up and his blood pressure began to rise. Because Hebrews *hated* Samaritans. Hebrews viewed Samaritans as this ethnically mixed, impure people who were sort of related to the Hebrews... but not really.

So to Hebrews, Samaritans were unclean heretics. They were the opposite of everything the *lawyer* thought faithfulness would look like.

But Jesus said, "When the *Samaritan* saw the man there, he had compassion. So he picked him up, bandaged his wounds, took him to an inn, and cared for him. He even paid the innkeeper, saying, 'Please take care of this guy. When I come back, pay you more.'"

Jesus asked the lawyer, "Now which one—the Hebrew priest, the Hebrew Levite, or the Samaritan—which one was a neighbor to the man in need?"

The lawyer couldn't bring himself to say "Samaritan," but at least he got the answer right. "The one who showed him mercy," he said. "The one who showed him mercy."

Now... let's be clear. The Samaritan isn't the model of Jesus' greatest commandment because the Samaritan and the guy who got mugged knew each other... they didn't.

Nor is the Samaritan the epitome of what faithfulness looks like because he and the guy on the side of the road shared the same background or even the same faith. They didn't. The guy who got mugged was Jewish... the Samaritan was not.

So according to Jesus, our neighbors—those we're called to love as ourselves—they're not determined by geography... or ethnicity... or religion... or nationality.

According to Jesus, our neighbor is defined as the one who needs us. Our neighbor... however and wherever we may find them... is defined as the one who needs us.

So certainly, your neighbor can live next door to you, across the street, around the block.

Your neighbor can be sitting in the same pew with you. Absolutely.

But our neighbors can also be found in inner city Baltimore right now, and in Louisiana this morning.

Our neighbors are found in Syria... and Southern Sudan... and Yemen.

Just as our neighbors—those we're called to love as much as we love ourselves—our neighbors come from El Salvador and Guatemala and Honduras and Nicaragua.

As hard and potentially offensive as it is, Jesus makes clear... our neighbors aren't defined as those who are easy to love. Neighbors aren't necessarily those who are most huggable because they don't have to live near us or be similar to us. No. Our neighbors are the ones who need the love and compassion that disciples are called to share!

So the lawyer got it right. "The one who showed him mercy," he said. That's what a true neighbor does.

Jesus told him, "You're right. Now go and do likewise." "Now that you know how to identify your neighbor... go and do likewise." *Period. Full stop.*

Please notice, as much as we might wish other there's no "unless" here.

Jesus doesn't tell the lawyer, "Go and do likewise unless the person has done this..."

Nor does Jesus say we're called to love our neighbors as ourselves "unless they're from a certain part of the world" or "carry certain citizenship papers."

No. Followers of Jesus Christ... you and me... we who profess to live into the way of the One who so clearly calls us to love God with everything we've got... we're also called to love our neighbors as ourselves. *Period. Full stop.*

As I shared a little while ago... this truth, friends, it can be offensive. For many, including myself, this passage is convicting. And make no mistake... it's incredibly inconvenient. It requires to sacrifice... to give time and resources and care we may not feel like giving.

But this is the greatest commandment of the one we call Messiah.

This is the way of the one we seek to follow ...

Because this, quite simply, is the way of love and reconciliation.

This is the way of grace and justice that has the power to redeem and transform the world from a place of competition and greed to a global community of reciprocity and compassion.

I'm so glad our children got to explore this truth this past week. Because the world needs it. The world needs this transformational truth. And it's our job, friends, it's our call to proclaim this truth in the words we share... in the policies we advocate for... in the gifts we give and the energy we offer and, quite simply, the way we approach those in need.

The keys to life, according to Jesus... the most important things we can possibly endeavor... are loving God with everything we've got, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. Even the ones who are hard to love... even the parts of Creation that are harder to hug. Because as our kids know so well... God loves *all* of God's amazing creatures!

Amen.