

Sermon
Calvary Lutheran Church, Morro Bay
Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
July 10, 2022
Luke 10:25-37

What a story! We know it backwards and forwards. It gets referenced in culture all the time. And yet it still gives up meanings for us today.

Luke is not exactly clear where geographically Jesus and the disciples are at this time. He is “on his way” to Jerusalem, and he has been taking everybody through Samaria from Galilee. Next week’s lesson has the group arriving at the house of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Now follow me here. Their home is in Bethany, which is on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, quite near to Jerusalem. But since Jesus and his disciples hadn’t been to Jerusalem yet on this trip, then today’s story might very well have taken place in Jericho. You get it? It’s a supposition, but it makes sense. Jesus was teaching at some place in Jericho, very likely. And the disciples were sitting around him. Resting, and also inviting the locals into the group. So they are about to travel on the road that is mentioned in Jesus’ story.

And, as the story goes, a religion scholar, a lawyer in the sense of the Law of Moses, a scribe, perhaps a Pharisee, a learned person, stands up, to test Jesus. There is very good reason to believe that the scribe, the lawyer, is out to get Jesus, to trap him. That was a common occurrence as Jesus’ ministry progressed, and a big reason why Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem.

And even though we read that the lawyer – let’s give him a name, let’s say “Adam” – even though we read that Adam stood up to “test” Jesus, it might not have been to catch him up in some heresy. Adam might have stood up boldly to better understand Jesus. Perhaps Adam was like Nicodemus, a learned, high-ranking scribe and Pharisee, who was, essentially, a disciple

of Jesus from afar. So let us imagine that Adam stood up more to clarify what Jesus is saying than to challenge him. And Adam asks, What must I do to inherit, teacher, to get, eternal life?

I should say that the whole concept of eternal life, which has to do with the depth as well as the length of life itself, was a contested idea among the religious leaders then, even as it is today. The Pharisees, including Adam here, believed that somehow, eternal life was possible and probable. The religious professionals of the temple, the priests and Levites, the Sadducees, didn't generally believe there was life after death. So perhaps Adam was wanting Jesus to affirm his particular belief in life after death.

Either way, Jesus takes Adam's question seriously. And he well knew the disagreements behind Adam's question. One can picture Jesus smiling, in the midst of his quite serious journey. I can hear the lightness of Jesus' voice, the love of Jesus' heart, Jesus' innate compassion. And he asks Adam, Well, dear student, what is written in God's Law? And, importantly, How do you interpret it? Jesus takes the question as one of immense personal importance to them both. It's almost as if Adam is a plant in the audience.

And then Adam, like a good plant, gives a wonderful answer. He answers, It has to do with loving God, and loving neighbor, as written in the book of Leviticus. Ah, Jesus replies, that is super! Do that and you **will live!**

Now what happens next is another place where one can make a different interpretation of this passage than what has been generally accepted. In the paraphrased version of *The Message*, which I just read, Adam is said to be looking for a loophole, and so he asks, And just how would you define "neighbor"? In the Revised Standard Version, the translation is that Adam is trying to justify himself with this question. Justifying what, that he had a limited understanding of neighbor? Justifying oneself usually means that someone is defensive, doesn't it. But the Greek

word for justifiably, *dikaiosai*, can also mean, in relation to God, “to put into a right relationship”, or, provocatively, “to set free”. You could say that Adam is trying to put things right with Jesus, maybe to see if, hopefully, they are on the same page. It then can be interpreted as a friendly question. Just how would you define “neighbor”, Adam asks, if we’re supposed to love our neighbor as ourselves? This is normal rabbi-student discourse.

And, Jesus, being a rabbi, says, Here’s a story, a parable. Let me just throw this out to you (which is the meaning of the word for “parable”, throwing something out). And then we hear about the robbers, the solo traveler, walking from Jerusalem to Jericho (the same route they’re about to take, only in the opposite direction), the priest and Levite, the Samaritan man, the innkeeper. And at the end, Jesus does not say, “Who was the one who loved their neighbor,” but rather, “Who acted as, or became a neighbor to the man on the side of the road?”

Ah, well that changes things. Because if the question is “who is my neighbor,” well we can talk about which category of fellow human being, at which radius from us, belonging to which clan or tribe, acting a certain way, or sympathizing with us qualifies as being our neighbor. That is a complicated analysis. You couldn’t tell a story about that lengthy legal determination. You could write a one-hundred-page treatise on the matter. You could write law upon law about the matter, with judge upon judge making refinements and opinions about “who is my neighbor.”

I would be happy with that. But instead, Jesus moves from “who is my neighbor?” to “how do I act as a neighbor?” Rats. Rats. Rats. I would prefer a considered level of distance from my neighbor.

It’s time to take apart that word: NEIGHBOR. It’s what you might expect. NEIGH means “near.” BOR has a more detailed origin and set of related words. BOR is mostly to do

with dwelling, like *borough* or *burrow*, or *burgh*. But also *bury*, and *borrow*. We find out the most ancient meaning of BOR had to do with protecting and sheltering. So that we “protect” a body by burying it. And earlier people “borrowed” something of value from someone to serve as security until some debt was paid. Like at a pawn shop. Under these considerations, a neighbor is not only a person or being that lives close to us. It can also mean someone who is in need of shelter and protection.

Which brings us to Jesus’ point. Our neighbor is not necessarily someone like us, in our neighborhood, within our sphere of habitation, but something more. Our neighbor can be someone in need of protection and shelter, whom WE come near to. I can tell you, nobody lives along the majority of the length of the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. It is desolate with a capital “D”. Everybody in Jesus’ crowd knew that. Anybody you met on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem was only your neighbor in the traditional sense if you knew one another already. But not in the Jesus sense of the word.

And when Jesus asked Adam “Who was like a neighbor to the man in need?”, Adam answers correctly, without evasion, and assuredly with understanding. The Samaritan. The Samaritan. They are in agreement, you see. Adam the lawyer doesn’t leave discouraged, like the rich young man. He leaves, we might presume, with this deepened understanding of loving his neighbor.

I pass by people who are in obvious need quite a bit of the time. I’m in a car, they’re standing on the corner. I don’t know their circumstances. Probably, some are lazy, some have mental illness. Others might have done things for which their families abandoned them. Some don’t speak English. A lot of the needy don’t show up on the streets. I may not like what I see, but by virtue of my seeing them, they are my neighbors.

Some of my possible neighbors actually live close to me, and some of them are grumpy and grouchy enough that I don't want to have anything to do with them. Ask me about my neighbor who literally cussed me out because he was sure that I did something to his property that I did not. I would like to believe that Jesus did not mean HIM when he reinforced this idea about being a good neighbor.

Or on another hand, the one of my brothers, though who for years was closer to me than anyone, as close as my right or left hand, as close as my heart in my chest...I would like to have permission to exclude him too from neighborly love. Or my least favorite politician/personality. (You can fill in that blank for yourself, I suspect.). That person is not worthy of my love or prayers or good wishes.

We can love this parable of Jesus as much as we want, retell it, assign good people and bad people, but we cannot escape its ultimate claim on us, Jesus' followers. In a moment, we're going to be singing "I Love To Tell the Story," of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love. It's a soaring melody, and lilting one, a positive message. And, if we're honest, a challenging one. Because "to tell the story of Jesus and his love" is not a saccharine thing. It can be a blasted thing. Except when we realize that we have been strangers to God at one time, and it was Jesus' love that touched us, that lifted us, that made us a neighbor – and child – of God.

I have a lot more of my own stories when I have sought or failed to love those whom I have met. People on the street, people with schizophrenia, who didn't smell good, who were antisocial. I bet you have those stories. Of befriending the person who didn't have friends, of helping the person who was offputting, of welcoming the stranger. I know that you, like me, have sought to follow Jesus, to act as a neighbor, without me having to preach to you about it. I

know you have compassion to drives you to action. I know you have respect for all creatures of God.

And....sometimes you don't, and sometimes I don't. And when we don't, we can reconsider Jesus's words and person, Jesus' love in action and regard for anybody who comes into his path. I know I'm still trying to figure out in my life how it all works out. Amen.

Rev. Brian Stein-Webber

July 9, 2022