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First Presbyterian Church  
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Luke 10:25-37  
1st in a Series

### **“Who Is My Neighbor?”**

Today I’m beginning a sermon series titled “Who Is My Neighbor?”. The idea first came to me last February when I was watching the Grammys and listening to Luke Combs and Tracy Chapman sing “Fast Car”. Here were two people who seemed incredibly different, but when they sang that song, we saw that our troubles and dreams can connect us and show us how much more we can accomplish together. It was a powerful moment.

So, knowing that in the Fall we would be in the middle of another presidential election when emotions are high and behavior is low, I kept mulling over what our – the church’s voice and presence – should and could be in the midst of it all. And I thought, it should be like that song. But it should also be more than that because as people of faith, we’re called to see the image of God in everyone, even the people we hate. Even the people who don’t vote like us. We must recognize that the person on the other side is also made in the image of God, and is also deserving of dignity, compassion and love.

So I started talking to the staff about this idea, and Brent got excited about how to tie it into the hymn festival at October’s music series concert, and Todd came up with the idea of casting Beauty and the Beast differently so this idea really hits home, and the middle school youth class is getting onboard and there will be a book study. And I’m really grateful to my awesome colleagues who shared my excitement and get it, because friends, if we don’t stop hating each other and vilifying each other, we’re going to die in a ditch. There’s no guarantee this country we love will last forever; other empires have come and gone. So, let’s show people, let’s witness – to use a very churchy word, to people that we can do better. Because the divisions we face today won’t be healed by doubling down on our differences or by further entrenching ourselves in our own perspectives. They will only be healed when we cross the road to reach out to those who are different than us or reach up to accept that helping hand even if it’s the hand of our enemy.

So, who is our neighbor? This is the question the lawyer asks Jesus in the parable of the Good Samaritan, and it’s just as relevant today as it was back then. Now I’m going to assume that we know the parable of the Good Samaritan. Show me your hands if you know it. That’s what I thought. Which is a problem, because when a story is so familiar, we tend to tune it out because we’ve already heard everything there is to be said. But contrary to

what you may have heard previous preachers preach, the GS isn't a moral lesson in how we should be kinder to people. The parable is a call to challenge our deepest prejudices. It's a call to radical love, which is to say a love that transcends boundaries and heals divisions.

So, when we listen to a parable our response shouldn't be, "Wow, wasn't that a nice story!" If it is, go back and listen to it until your response is, "What! I'm not sure what that means but I'm certain I don't like it!", because that's what a parable is meant to do. It's meant to provoke and indict.

Which leads us to the GS. You know the story. A lawyer comes up to Jesus and they start talking and after some back and forth the lawyer asks, "So, who is my neighbor?" Now, Jesus knows that what the lawyer really is asking is "Who's not my neighbor?" because certainly Jesus can't expect him to treat everyone like they're a neighbor, right? So, the lawyer asks for clarification because he needs some limits on this neighbor-thing.

Now, Jesus could have responded with a long discourse and definition of a neighbor, but he doesn't. Instead, he tells him a parable, which means the lawyer is about to be indicted.

"There was a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho," Jesus begins. He's beaten, robbed, stripped, and left for dead in a ditch. Along the road comes a priest, who walks on by. And then a Levite comes and walks on by. Now I want to pause here because you've probably heard people say that the priest and Levite couldn't stop to help because that would have left them ritually unclean and therefore unfit for service in the temple. But this isn't true. There's nothing in Jewish law that talks about that and in fact the law was clear; they should have stopped to help. But they didn't.

Amy-Jill Levine a Jewish NT scholar, who has really changed my thinking about the Good Samaritan, says the best excuse she's heard for why the two men didn't stop came from MLK Jr. He said something like this: I don't know why they walked by the man in the ditch, but here's what my imagination tells me. Perhaps these men were afraid. The priest and the Levite say to themselves, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me? Because here are bandits on the road." But the Samaritan, King imagines, says, "If I don't stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" King went on to say, "If I don't stop to help the sanitation workers in Memphis, what will happen to them?" And we all know what happened to King because there were bandits on the road.

But back to the parable – if we put ourselves in the shoes of the original listeners, they all knew if there was a priest and a Levite, the third person was always an Israelite. It's called the rule of 3 and we still do this. For example, if I say – Larry, Curly, -- you would say –

And if I say, Father, son – you would say . . .

That's how the rule of 3 works. But Jesus turned the rule on its head, and to a 1st century audience hearing, "A priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan!!!!" (that) would have been blasphemous, because Jews and Samaritans hated each other. Why, just before Jesus tells this parable the disciples and Jesus are roaming around Samara looking for a place to stay but none of the Samaritans will let them in. And it so enrages James and John that they ask Jesus if they can drop a bolt of lightning on the city and incinerate them all! Not exactly their finest moment, if you ask me. And Jesus predictably tells them um, no, you cannot do that.

So, there's no love-loss between these two groups.

So back to Amy-Jill Levine, who I mentioned earlier, she puts a modern twist on the parable so we all understand just how harsh it would have sounded to its original listeners.

Levine reminds us that Ancient Samaria is variously known as the West Bank, the future Palestinian state, occupied territory, or greater Israel – depending on your perspective. So, if one were to tell the parable of the GS in modern terms, it would go like this: "I'm an Israeli Jew going down the Jerusalem to Jericho road. I'm waylaid by bandits, stripped, beaten, and left for dead in a ditch. Two people walked by, and they should have stopped to help but they didn't. The first person was a Jewish medic from the Israel Defense force, and the second person was a Presbyterian from the Middle East Peace Network. And the person who stops to help is a Palestinian Muslim member of Hamas, which is an organization dedicated to Israel's destruction. That's how provocative the parable is. And the person in the ditch, the Israeli Jew, has to say my life is dependent on that person, my enemy.

"Who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asks.

And the answer? The very worst person you can imagine, Jesus responds. Your enemy.

Now does the weight of the parable hit home. It does for me. I know I'm no longer thinking what a nice story this about how I should help other people. Because that's easy, or at least easier than this. Because We like to think we're the Samaritan. We're always the Samaritan. But the truth is sometimes We're the person in the ditch, and we'd rather die than accept help from our enemy. I don't want my enemy doing something nice for me. That just screws up the relationship! As Levine says, "If our enemies start showing niceness and compassion to us, that messes up our categories. ... But that's exactly what the Samaritan does." And the hard truth of this parable, and the challenge it teaches us is that the face of our enemy is also made in the image of God. And The face of the person who might kill us might also save our lives.

Yes, there are bandits on the road. And yes, it's dangerous. But Jesus says recognize that everyone is a human being. And the person who saves you might be the person you think is the enemy. Can we acknowledge the possibility of that?

The parable offers another vision of how things could be, and it's a radical vision no doubt. But is an also a vision of life rather than death. It insists that enemies can prove to be neighbors, that compassion has no boundaries, and that judging people on the basis of their religion or ethnicity will leave us dying in a ditch. Friends, if we could just put a human face on other people, we might be able to talk to each other, and the point of the parable is that we have to give that person a chance, because if we don't, we just may die in a ditch."

Amen.

*Gracious and Loving God,*

*We give You thanks for the story of the Good Samaritan, reminding us that love transcends boundaries and breaks through enmity. Open our eyes, O Lord, to see Your face in those we call enemy, to recognize Your image in those we least expect. Give us hearts of compassion, so that we may not pass by the suffering of others, lest we too become lost in the ditch of indifference.*

*Help us to live, Lord, as Your people—healed, reconciled, and transformed by the love that sees no stranger. In the name of Christ, who showed us what it means to love beyond measure, we pray. Amen.*

Sources:

Amy-Jill Levine, for all her thoughts on the parable of the Good Samaritan, including her book "Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi"