

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling  
First Presbyterian Church  
October 6, 2024  
Luke 10:25-37  
5th and Final in “Who Is My Neighbor?” series

### **“Who Is My Neighbor?”**

Well friends we made it through the sermon series “Who Is My Neighbor?” I know for many of us it was a challenge and to that I want to say, “Congratulations! You now understand the weight and importance of being a neighbor to everyone . . . not just those you want to be a neighbor to, or those you agree with or see similarities with yourself . . . but everyone. I’ve often said, and here I’m paraphrasing someone else, that if our response to one of Jesus’ parables is “Sounds great!”, we are probably missing the point. Jesus’ parables are meant to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted, and a lot of us here are comfortable, including myself. So, to those who have made it this far, thank you. Thank you for being willing to struggle and stretch and think and grow in your faith. Not all are willing to do that.

I also want to say thank you for being a church that is a good neighbor! Thank you for packing backpacks of food every Sunday for every student at Washington Elementary School. Thank you for your financial gifts which help us support the students and staff at Washington Elementary School and South Wayne Elementary School. Through the Schools Team this church does some really neat things for both students and staff.

Thank you for bringing food in on Sundays, which supplements the food the church purchases for the food pantries at Wellspring, East Wayne Street, and United Faith Presbyterian Church. Without your pledges we couldn’t do that; and our neighbors rely on that food to feed their families.

Thank you for supporting Project 216 with your time, talents and treasure. This is our 10th year, which means we’ve packed 250,000 meals. A quarter of a million meals!! That’s amazing work helping neighbors we don’t know and will probably never meet. Don’t forget to sign up in the small dining room to help this year on October 16.

But we do more than help other people with food – though food is certainly a major part of our outreach and mission budget. We also share meals here with one another at things like the Chili Cook-Off, or new this year Church in the Park, or here in a little while in McKay Hall for a communion feast. We’re a neighbor to one another. And speaking of, I’m always grateful for the ministry of our Deacons, who faithfully visit our members who can no longer attend church, and who send cards to our members who are facing challenges. Every week

these people hear from the church, which is so important and lets them know whether they are here or not, they're our neighbor.

And we welcome into our building many of our neighbors at our shows in the theater, or gallery openings, and music series concerts. For some of these people, their only interaction with the church – and maybe any church – is through our arts ministry. In a world pulsating with the need for beauty, truth, and hope, our arts ministry is vital and gives us the opportunity to be a gracious, almost subversive presence and neighbor in our city.

And of course, we learn what it means to be a neighbor in our Sunday School classes and Bible Studies, in youth group and Wired Word, and here in worship, too, when we sing and pray and study with people with whom we may not normally do those things.

In all these endeavors, you are being a neighbor to everyone. So, thank you. Thank you for being Christ's hands and feet and heart and head in this neighborhood and beyond. Thank you for being the Good Samaritan and helping the person in the ditch no matter who the person is, what you may think of them, or how they wound up there. In a world where too many people see oppression and cross the street or see someone in a ditch and think "not my problem", or walk on by because what's that have to do with me, you don't. So, thank you for being the people and the church you are.

Because here's the thing, friends. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus doesn't care how the guy got into the ditch. Jesus doesn't care that the Samaritans and the Jews were arch enemies. What Jesus did know is that a different story needed to be told in order for a different kind of future to unfold. And that thinking still stands. In order for a different story to be told in our neighborhood, our big old neighborhood of the USA, we need to recognize that the hero in our story may be the last person we want to call good.

Jesus also doesn't care what the Samaritan believes. It's only what the man does that matters. So he reads a different scripture, or goes to a different temple, or follows a different way. So what? Jesus is focused on the man's actions, not his beliefs. This may be upsetting to all of us who have been taught that it's our faith that saves, not our good works, but then again, Jesus wasn't a very good Protestant.

What Jesus did know was that right beliefs don't put a cup of water into the hands of the thirsty; right beliefs don't put a bandage on the wounds of someone who is injured; right beliefs don't pay the lodging bill of someone who needs a place to sleep, and right beliefs don't put a meal into the bellies of the hungry. Even the young lawyer knew that: what must I do, he asked. Not, what must I believe to inherit eternal life. But what must I do? It's a fine question; it got the man to think, and even by the end of the story, it got him to answer his

own question. Who was the neighbor, Jesus asked? The Samaritan, the lawyer responded. The one who showed him kindness.

Friends, I don't need to tell you that kindness is conspicuously absent from the world today. Why that's in part why I'm doing this series – to raise awareness that we need kindness, and that it should begin with us. Indeed, we are the ones we're waiting for! If we don't want so much polarization and division, let's not be a part of that. If we want people to get along, let's work to get along. You know, in the simplicity of this parable, we tend to forget that the person in the ditch was as much a nuisance to the Samaritan as he was to the priest and Levite. But the Samaritan set aside his needs so that he could help. Remember what MLK said about this parable:

*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?"*

The late Kurt Vonnegut grasped the essence of the parable when he was asked by a young American from Pittsburgh, "Please tell me it will all be OK", which is the contemporary equivalent of asking for eternal life. "Welcome to Earth, young man," Vonnegut said. "It's hot in summer and cold in winter. It's round and wet and crowded. At the outside, Joe, you've got about 100 years here. There's only one rule that I know of: you've got to be kind."

Friends the parable of the Good Samaritan is a story for all of us who are travelling the road of faith; it's a scriptural GPS, if you will. And this GPS takes us in one direction, and one direction only: and that is the direction God desires which is the way of love and compassion for others. There is no excluding those we don't like, or singing "Joyful, joyful, we adore thee" while walking by injured people.

There is only one way, and that is the way of compassion and love; and this love is not a feeling, but a doing. This is agape love which not a fleeting emotion, but rather a commitment that transcends circumstances. This is the way of life Jesus calls us to embrace and live, and it has the power to change the world one ditch at a time.

So keep doing what you're doing. Keep loving, because this is the way to eternal life, and not just for you, but for your neighbor, too.

Amen.