

Fifth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C): "Neighbor: Who, Me?"

Luke 10:25-37

July 9-10, 2022

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"That's right neighborly of ya'!" We hear it in old movies or movies about old times.

What does it mean, though? What does being "right neighborly" look like?

When I was growing up, it meant my father calling up Mrs. Blumette at "O dark hundred" (she was a nurse and lived around the block) to say I was sick and to ask if she could take care of me during the day till my sisters got home from school. (My mom had died, my father worked in NYC, and the nearest relatives lived too far away to come to the rescue. We depended on our neighbors a lot.) Being "right neighborly" meant handing over a cup of sugar or a couple eggs or whatever else a nearby family needed for a recipe and didn't have on hand. It still means taking in someone else's mail and keeping an eye out for packages when they're away on vacation.

Neighbor is made up of a couple of Old and Middle English words that meant "nearby farmer." I guess most everyone was a farmer in those days, and maybe lived on a pretty large plot of land, so one didn't have too many others living too close by. 'Kinda like in nomadic desert culture, to offer hospitality was to be a literal lifesaver in some cases. You couldn't call 911 and there were no telehealth options. If someone was in an accident and bleeding, if a pregnant woman went into labor and the midwife was far away, who did you depend on? Your neighbor. It was a matter of proximity, of geographic nearness, of life and death.

In Leviticus 19:18, neighbor is pretty much defined as “*anyone of your kin.*” So it was a matter of blood line, of marriage. But in Deuteronomy 10:19, neighbor is defined much more broadly: “*You shall also love the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*”

Strangers – the people we are least apt to love. After all, we don’t know them (if we knew them, they wouldn’t be strangers); we don’t know their stories; and since there’s only so much energy, compassion, money and time to go around, we tend to spend it all on those we **do** know and love. We make distinctions. We draw lines in the sand.

The lawyer in today’s Gospel wants to know where he is allowed to draw the line. He’s not a lawyer as in representing people in court; he’s an expert in the Jewish law. He knows the rules and he knows the exceptions to the rules, but there’s always more to learn, and differing opinions to weigh. He knows that to inherit eternal life he needs to love God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength, and he has to love his neighbor as himself. But he certainly can’t go around loving everyone! So exactly **who** stands under the umbrella of “neighbor”? In his view, only so many people can shelter under his particular umbrella. He asks Jesus, “*And who **is** my neighbor?*” so he can know who **isn’t** his neighbor and therefore whom he can safely ignore, who he can say with confidence have no claim on him.

Jesus answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan. The adjective “good” is never used, but that’s our shorthand for this story. We don’t say it’s the parable of the guy who was dumb enough to travel alone on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho and who got mugged in the process. We don’t say it’s the parable of the priest and the Levite who passed by on the other side of the road, either out of fear the fellow in the ditch was a decoy to distract them while other brigands robbed them, or out of concern they’d be rendered unclean to perform their Temple duties, or out of disdain for all Samaritans, or out of

callousness toward any stranger. Jesus doesn't describe anyone's thought process in the story. He doesn't characterize the people with adjectives. He describes their actions. Then He asks the man who asked the original question:

*"Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" (Luke 10:36)*

And he, bright man that he is, responds, *"The one who showed him mercy."* Then Jesus simply says: *"Go and do likewise."* (Luke 10:37) That's what Jesus says to us, too: *"Go and do likewise."*

It's so cool how Jesus turns the tables on the lawyer's question "Who is my neighbor?" and transforms it into the challenge, "Are **you** a neighbor?" The unspoken message is, "You **are** a de facto neighbor of anyone in need; but are you **acting** like a neighbor?" Montefiore put it simply: "**Who needs me is my neighbor.**"

The **down** side of the immediacy with which we hear stories and view videos and photos of what is happening around the world is that we get overwhelmed by the sheer volume of suffering we see. The **up** side is that we are **aware** of those who need our material and spiritual help. Individually and as a congregation and as the ELCA and as the Body of Christ we can't heal the world, feed every hungry person, welcome every refugee, comfort every grieving person, encourage every despairing person, meet every need in the world. But we can **care** and we can **do** what God empowers us to do in this place, at this time, on our watch. In a recent column David Brooks quotes George Bernard Shaw: "The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: That's the essence of inhumanity."<sup>1</sup> Being unable to do **everything** isn't justification to do **nothing**. As Mother Teresa of Calcutta said, "We can do no great things, only small things with great love."

The priest and the Levite in today's parable **will not do anything** for the waylaid, beaten, bleeding traveler, other than cross to the other side of the road like the chicken in the old joke. By contrast, the Samaritan **cannot do enough** for the stranger in the ditch. To most of the Jews of Jesus' day, every Samaritan was a good-for-nothing half-breed heretic. Yet the Samaritan is the hero in the story Jesus tells. One Bible scholar has said that **Jesus is like the Samaritan** in the story: the "ultimate outsider" who gives wholeheartedly of himself for others' salvation.

In Jesus' book, it goes without saying that the mom and dad and kids who'd been sleeping in their car before they found Family Promise, are our neighbors. In Jesus' book, the people who turn to the food pantry to help feed themselves and their children, are our neighbors. In Jesus' book, the Iraqi, Ukrainian, Congolese, refugees whom I-RISE in Highland Park resettles are our neighbors. In Jesus' book, there is no such thing as a stranger; every human being is a child of God, a holy sibling, regardless of their faith or lack thereof. In Jesus' book, the only question of interest is: "Are **you** a neighbor?" Amen

<sup>1</sup>David Brooks, "Why Mass Shooters Do the Evil They Do," *NY Times* (7/2/22), A20.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham