

July 10, 2016



“Neighborly Mercy”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.’ And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’ Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

The passage Cindy just read for us from the tenth chapter of Luke’s Gospel contains a possibly familiar story. I say “possibly familiar” aware that increasingly, in our American society, more and more people do not know the Bible and its stories. Prof. Stephen Prothero of Boston University documents this in his book, Religious Literacy: What Ever American Needs to Know—and Doesn’t. In all fairness, you may be thinking that as a preacher, I simply think everyone should find important what I find important. There’s some truth in that, because I think the stories in this book [the Bible] point the way to life and life eternal.

But Prothero’s alarm about our biblical ignorance points to something bigger. For generations and generations these biblical stories shaped our values as a people. They oriented us in the world and helped undergird our decision-making. With the loss of shared story and meaning comes a kind of disorientation and the ties that bind no longer hold us together.

It’s obviously too simplistic to say that if only we all knew the Bible, we’d be fine. But I think you might agree with me that the state of civil discourse in our nation is in abysmal shape. That shouting at one another seems to be the preferred mode of what used to be called debate and reasoning. That ignoring or belittling or fearing or punishing those whose views and perspectives and language and faith differ from ours has come to be accepted. The ties that bind, the common grounds of compassion, what we might call “neighborly mercy” have given way to a kind of insular selfishness and self-centeredness.

At the same time, events of this past week have again appalled us and broken our hearts. We are again confronted by issues of racism, police-community relations, gun violence, needless and tragic loss of life. We are grieving and fearful, fearful not only for our own safety, but for the very future of our cities and nation, and even of democracy itself.

The wisdom of biblical stories is not the whole answer to what ails us, but it gives us some clues and points us in some healthy and salvific directions.

Consider the questions asked in today’s passage: What must I do to inherit eternal life? Who is my neighbor? Who was a neighbor to the man beaten and robbed?

Do these not go to the heart of the journey we’re all on, regardless of our views, our politics, our language or our nationality of origin? Is not every child of God on a journey from life to eternal life, life in all its abundance? Is not every child of God hungry for community and relationship? Does not every child of God long to live free from fear, in this life and the next?

The stories we hear today point the way. Now usually this passage is separated into two parts. Part A: a lawyer or scribe we might say, wanting to catch Jesus out, asks what he must do to inherit to eternal life. Jesus answers by directing the question back to him. You’ve studied the law. What does it say? “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” Right answer, Jesus says, as if it’s simple. “Just do it, and you will live.”

Part B. The lawyer thinks he’s got Jesus here on this. How can I possibly do that, if I don’t even know for sure who my neighbor is? You can already imagine his mind parsing it out, thinking perhaps to himself—I could be nice to this one and that one and the few people I know and like....but all those others I don’t know, don’t like, don’t really care one whit about....they’re not “neighbors” are they, Jesus?

And so Jesus tells him a story. Tells us a story. The story we call “The Good Samaritan.” About a Jew travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho, robbed, beaten, left for dead. His own religious leaders, a priest and a Levite, see him, but pass by on the other side. It is a Samaritan, the hated enemy of his people, who has compassion on him. Who tears down all the

walls that separate them—religion, custom, fear, enmity—tears down all the walls and shows mercy. Go, Jesus says, and do likewise.

It's important and instructive to hold Parts A and B of this story together. Otherwise we get a false dichotomy between what we should know in our minds—what's the greatest law?—and what we are to do in our lives—how are we to live? But that misses a huge part of what's going on here. Because Jesus actually responds to the lawyer not just as his Teacher, as he'd called him, but as his neighbor. Jesus shows him neighborly mercy in *his* need. Being a neighbor is who I am, Jesus wants us to know. And as his disciples, it's who we are all to be.

Here's what I mean. As a teacher, Jesus could have just answered the man's question directly by reminding him of the law. Exchange over and done. Instead, he draws him into relationship by engaging the question with him. He sees the lawyer in a bigger perspective. He sees him as a fellow human being, with questions not only on his lips but in his heart. He looks past his words to a deeper hunger. Jesus shows him respect, takes him seriously. He gives him a great gift—the gift of his time and complete attention. He lingers with him long enough to forge a bit of a bond, drawing him into conversation and taking the time to share with him a story.

I am *your* neighbor, Jesus is showing him, and I care enough about you to spend time with you, to go deeper with you, and to share with you an insight into the true meaning of faith that will take you out of your comfort zone and further along on the path to eternal life. Jesus is doing what he told those 70 apostles to do in the passage we heard last week—he's healing, he's creating peace, he's showing us how to be at the table together, and in so doing, he's making visible the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is showing the lawyer how a neighbor acts, who a neighbor is at the core. So when his follow-up story pushes that notion even farther, to show that this is how even enemies and those long estranged are to be neighbors for one another, the lawyer is already prepared, somewhat, to take that leap of faith.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, as his apostles in and for the world, this is a big part of what it means to “be the hope.” It's never been more important than it is right now—in our communities, our cities, our nation, our world. Jesus calls us and empowers us to be neighbors with and for one another, no matter who that “other” is. We are to be those who show neighborly mercy to all. To bind up the broken hearted and to re-weave the bonds that bind us to one another in love.

To my mind, this is a big part of the work of our YSP Mission Team. It might not be the first thing we think of when we think about what they're going off to do and when we pray for them and show them our love and support. We first think of the work they'll do, the homes they will repair. We think of communities in need and what we can bring to them and do for them. And if you've been to enough of our Teams' Report Backs, you'll know that we'll also think of how they themselves, our youth and their adult leaders, will be transformed by the experiences they have. When we listen to their sermons as high school seniors on Youth Sunday, don't we often hear their witness to just how important these trips have been in their becoming who they are?

But there's one more thing I want to hold up this morning as we dedicate this year's Team. They are going out as neighbors to live and work alongside people they've never met or seen before. They're going to live out “neighborly mercy.” They are going to form relationships with others of God's children who otherwise might remain out of sight and distant from our minds and hearts. They are going to make visible the ties that truly bind us to one another. The trip gives time and space for the development of friendship and relationship across lines and distance that might otherwise keep us apart. Their engagement with one another helps us all to find common ground. It builds the foundation of mutual caring and respect.

This is the greatest gift of their going. For this is priceless. It is at the heart of living into the great commandment to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves. This is the path, Jesus says, to life, life abundant, life everlasting.

To love God is to love our neighbor is to love God.

There was another headline in the news this past week that didn't get much attention. I heard it as a powerful witness to hope. Just yesterday, three astronauts arrived at the International Space Station after a two-day flight in a tiny space capsule, all smooshed together on their way up. Three astronauts—an American, a Russian, and a Japanese.

Three whose pasts are replete with violence, suspicion and enmity. Think about it—an American and a Japanese? A Japanese and a Russian? An American and a Russian? No longer enemies. Now, instead, a team focused on a mission to provide knowledge and benefits to all the people of earth—advancements in medicine, technology and science, perhaps creating treatments for diseases that as of now have no cure.

They're up there right now, circling overhead, working away, no doubt, showing us that when we humans put our minds to it, anything is possible. Reminding us that cures to all kinds of diseases are possible, even those most pernicious social diseases that threaten to tear us apart. Their mission reminds us that change is possible. Right relationships are possible. Understanding and respect are possible. Total transformation of enemies into neighbors is possible.

The prophet Isaiah said it this way, more than 2500 years ago:

*If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.*

(Isaiah 58 NRSV)

Then shall you be called the restorer of streets—the restorer of streets, of communities, of nations, even the far distant heavens...you shall then be called the restorer of streets to live in.

May God bless our YSP Team with a deep and rich, challenging and fun experience. May God bless the neighbors whom they go to meet and love.

May God bless us all this day with new hope, new conviction, and renewed dedication to the things that make for peace and the transforming presence of the Kingdom of God in our midst.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.

Notes:

Stephen Prothero: Religious Literacy: What Every American Should Know—And Doesn't. HarperSanFrancisco, 2007.

Rev. Susan Kendall. "Reflections on the Lectionary." The Christian Century. June 22, 2016.

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