

## Who is my neighbor?

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Luke 10:25-37

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There's this guy who showed up at this old church one Sunday. He used to go to a church but had walked away for decades and kind of floated from place to place right up until his Dad died. His Dad had been a member of that old church back in the day, and it was when this guy was at his breaking, that he took this emotional pilgrimage to retrace his steps. And so, he came back, to his Dad's old church, looking for answers. When he came for the first time, he said he immediately was welcomed, someone greeted him in the parking lot, walked him inside, introduced him to a few people, sat with him, and he said he felt like his Dad had led him there. To that place that feels so familiar, just like going back to the place you grew up in, but took for granted for so long. He was in tears that first Sunday, in that old church, like a dam had broken open within him. Then the very next Sunday, he came back, and he ran into the people who live next door to him, turns out they're already members of the church.

He does not get along with them.

It was several weeks later in a new members class that he turned to the Pastor and said, "Man, those people really annoy me, and you're sitting here telling me 'love 'em the way God loves me?'" Well... yeah.

That's the way that God shakes us up. Because, sometimes the dust we need to shake off isn't of a town that's rejected us, but is our own stuff. Like we've been chilling out in the attic for way too long, content to be among the things of the past, past visions, past feelings and emotions, past loves and relationships, past ideas about how church is supposed to work. We need the dust blown off of us to remind us whose we are and where we belong. We need the wind of the Holy Spirit to move us up out of stagnation and into new life.

Often, that new life means answering a very unexpected question, "You mean I've got to love those people the way that God loves me?"

This is the central question of the one coming to Jesus. If I'm to "love my neighbor as myself," I need to know exactly who that is. Behind that question is a presumption about what it means to "neighbor." We're told that the man wants to "justify" himself. He's already made up his mind. He already has his course plotted in. I think that's true for a lot of us. We come with an expectation of who our neighbors are, what they'll look like, what their experiences will have been. In other words, we imagine our neighbors as we are. But, that's only because we lack imagination. God does not.

A few years back I started teaching a class called "Conversations on Religion and Race." Spurred by experiences and conversations I had had in Seminary, and a renewed social/cultural focus on issues of race, I set out to get a group together to talk about it. There was a small, but brave contingent that walked into class on the first week when I handed out a covenant. It detailed the syllabus, the books needed, where our conversation would go, and stated that by signing the covenant, we were agreeing to enter into difficult work in grace, love, and holiness.

It was not perfect. Some folks almost quit. It was hard background work. It was boundary redefining work. In the end, one member came up to me and recounted a story of an encounter she had had, between herself, this white woman caring for an ailing relative, and a young black nurse. She realized while was visiting, she had ordered her relative some lunch from the kitchen, but the lunch didn't come as quickly as she had expected. So, she pleaded her case to that young nurse, who said she would "look into it." About 45 minutes passed from that point and she had started to get irritated, so she went down to the kitchen to "see what was going on." She confessed that she was less interested in finding anything out and more interested in expressing her anger. She found the nurse she had spoken with and got right in her face, demanding to know what was taking so long. By the time she got back to her relative's room, the food

had arrived. She said, "It was not a moment I'm proud of," then paused. She started back with "but," and I assumed that she was going to justify her frustration, and she would not be completely wrong in that. She continued, "I thought about what we had learned in this class, I thought about the nurse, and I tried to place myself in her situation. I know they don't get paid well and they put up with a lot. I was probably not the first family member to get angry with her that day. So, I started to think about how there may be questions of justice to ask about her life. When I considered all of that, I realized that I had not treated her as a full person. I went back and apologized to her the next day. I knew I had done wrong from the day before because when I started to approach her she visibly recoiled, like I was about to hit her. I apologized, saying that I was frustrated with the time it had taken, but that I had not approached her appropriately about my concerns and that I would do better in the future. I don't remember what she said, if she said anything back at all, but I remember the look on her face. She was confused and I'm willing to bet that has never happened to her before."

She realized that a critical part of being a neighbor is a willingness to enter into relationship with someone, which begins with recognizing the nurse, returning to apologize, thinking that she might not be considering this nurse as a full person, complex with history and experiences that may be different and beyond her own. That boundary started to reshape. A relationship began to form, a shared story opened up.

What are some of the other boundaries we erect to define ourselves? Do those boundaries divide us into tribes that must break the other down? Or do they affirm our kinship and give life? Do they celebrate the beauty in the diversity of God's people and God's Kingdom?

What Jesus knew in answering the question "who is my neighbor?" Is that, Relationships and stories matter. They're the foundations upon which we build connectedness and community. They're how we know we are where we are meant to be.

My CYF director had this brilliant idea last year to open our church up to the State's "Meet Up & Eat Up" program. The State provides food, our program is lunches, for any kid 18 and under. I like the program because it aligns with the way we do ministry, all are welcome. Any kid can get a meal. The State just needs places to play host and keep track of how many meals go out. In the past we had been using them just for a week when we ran what is effectively an arts camp we call Creative Kids Week. But she said, let's do it for the whole summer. The need is there in our community. 66% of our students are eligible for free or reduced price lunches, and 89% of those kids are eligible for free lunches. So we got our stuff together, we organized servant leaders to host every single week day, we got our advertising together, everything was in place for this amazing and obviously needed program. And then... nothing. Weeks went by and maybe three kids would come. Sometimes two of them were grandkids of one of our servant leaders. It was toward the end of July, when we host our Ice Cream Social, that's always a big hit in the neighborhood, and a family stopped by for the first time. A mom and two young boys. I got to talking to the mom, she told me a little of her story, the challenges of raising two boys, the desire to have safe places for them to be kids, the need for summer activities, and I said to her, well, you know we have this lunch program, it's free. She said, "I didn't know that was free!"

I wonder how often we miss out because we haven't built those relationships and told those stories. The Samaritan recognizes the need of the person bloodied and beaten on the side of the road, and then responds. But we cannot respond if we do not first recognize. We cannot tell our story, we cannot build relationships if we are not already present before our neighbors. When we recognize our neighbors, we see each other in a shared story.

I think we might even treat grace the same way. Some folks try to take a pass on the grace of God, the invitation of the Holy Spirit, the love of Jesus Christ, because we assume there's a price for everything. Something has to be extracted, nothing is freely given. That causes even those of us who claim God's grace at work in our lives to respond to problems with scarcity.

We respond with scarcity when we're uneasy about new faces in the church, we respond in scarcity when someone "takes" our pew seat, we respond in scarcity when we separate ourselves from changes in the neighborhood, or when the report for the church isn't going the way it used to. We respond with scarcity when we think about how much it takes to make the church reflect the neighborhood as it changes.

Our reality is that there are no shortage of ditches in our communities. There are no shortage of desperate situations, broken bodies, and wounded people.

There are no shortage of children and youth, bullied and beaten in our schools and our youth groups. There are no shortage of women in our communities and churches wounded and abused by men who were supposed to be trusted. There are no shortage of trans young people beaten, violated, and left for dead for daring to be out. There are no shortage of black men and women shot up after failing to signal, after shopping at Walmart, after asking the wrong question, after seeking help from a neighbor.

How do we even begin to neighbor to people who will far too often take a pass on a free offer assuming there's some catch? How do we step into the ditch if we don't already have a connection? How do we begin to heal wounds if we aren't able to acknowledge them?

So in the face of these perils, this destruction, this violence, and this death what possible message might we have?

In the midst of all of those feelings of scarcity, of fear, and the challenges of big complex issues, we still need to have some Good News for our neighborhoods, because our neighbors really need some Good News!

We take on all kinds of ministries and every time we do something, I'll inevitably hear "shouldn't we be just a little more selective with what we give away?" Like, maybe we could make some money off the nicer stuff we get donated to the Free Store. Which, is typically followed by, "I can't believe we just let people take this stuff!"

Here's what I appreciate about folk's discipleship in the church. Those same folks, with all their complaints and inability to see the value in it, will be there the very next day, handing over a box of food, or helping someone select an item of clothing, or lifting some heavy furniture and helping to move it into someone's house. That is the extravagant love of God at work.

Even when it's hardest, we take a two-front stand for our neighbors in sharing that Good News. We assume 1) if you're here, you need to be. 2) We'll trust that God is doing something good in your life and our's because you're here. If I'm being real, that is exceptionally difficult work to do. Especially when items get stolen, or people fight, or the crisis in someone's life is pretty much unending. In those moments I have to remember that I don't know everyone's story, because I don't know everyone the way that God does. But if I take the grace of God seriously, then I better be ready for God to show up in a stranger, in the person who I can only describe as "the one who lives next door", I have to be ready for God to show up in the one who annoys me, or scares me, or challenges me in ways I don't like, and I better be ready for God to ask me to do some neighbor(ing) while we're together.

If we can enter into relationship with someone and carry with us a presumed orientation toward neighborliness within our hearts, we upend the way this stuff is supposed to work. We may just find ourselves neighbor(ing). Drawn to people we might otherwise categorize as "those people next door," or the ones from the neighborhood I will not enter. Perhaps even drawn out of our attics, out of our safe walls and neatly arranged spaces to bear witness to our neighbor, to the ditch they lay in, and the conditions upon which it was made possible for them to be in that ditch in the first place. Our unwillingness to go there is not descriptive of God's willingness. In fact, God is already at work in those places, beckoning us to get on board with the program.

That man who came back to that old church, only to find the people he least wanted to find, is still there. Hard at work. Hard at learning. Hard at loving. Hard at Neighbor(ing), especially when it's hard.

Our neighbors are the ones whom God loves. While the question, "Who is my neighbor?" is asked as a means to corner Jesus into taking a position on regulations, to vouchsafe eternity in specificity, Jesus pushes back to remind us that the categories we're using don't make sense in God's Kingdom, so God's breaking them. God's turning the whole thing over.

So that y'all can love 'em the way God loves you. That's neighbor(ing). That's our neighbor.