

Who Are Our Neighbors?
Luke 10:25-37
July 10, 2022—St. Andrew Presbyterian

The story begins
when a lawyer stands up
to ask Jesus a question.

Let's not be too hard
on the lawyer.
No lawyer jokes today.
The lawyer's question is
one that many people ask.

"What must I do
to inherit eternal life?"
In fact, as preacher Scott Black Johnston points out,
"To many people of faith,
it's the most
important question
of all....

What things
must I accomplish
to merit
a hand-inscribed invitation
to heaven?

What must I do
to inherit eternal life?"

(Scott Black Johnston, "The Reading Test", Day 1, July 11, 2004,
<http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=8>)

And notice that
Jesus doesn't give the lawyer
a blueprint
kind of answer.
There is no simple,
step-by-step
plan for salvation here.

Instead, Jesus answers
the lawyer's question
with a question.

Jesus says,
"What's in the law?"
In other words,
you've been to school...
Cough it up!

And sure enough,
the lawyer nails it—

the double command
 to love God with everything you have,
 and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Summa cum laude.

Give the guy a gold star.

"Do that and you will live," says Jesus.

But that's not enough for the lawyer.

"Wait just a billable minute"

Black Johnston imagines the lawyer saying.

"How big of a job is that going to be?

This could get tricky.

It could take over my whole life.

Love God and neighbor?

I need a little clarification here, Jesus.

Tell me,

who counts?

Who is my neighbor?"

(op. cit.)

I really don't think

that the lawyer is being evil
 or narrow minded here.

The story says that

he wanted to justify himself.

That means that

he wanted to be sure

that he was getting it right.

He is like we are.

We know

that this business of loving neighbor
 is a huge job!

We can't do it all!

There *must* be some limits somewhere.

We'll wear out...

We'll *burn* out....

If we try to do it all!

So, Jesus,

you're going to have to
 clarify things for us!

Are you talking about the panhandlers
 on the entrances

to the highway?

What about people stopped with flat tires
 on the side of the road?

What if it's the middle of the night

and I'm by myself?
Does that count?

Does this include

my infuriating co-worker?

What about the person

who lives across the street

and whose political views

are highly offensive...no, terrifying to me?

Do I have to help him, too?

This business of loving neighbor

begins to seem very complicated.

Maybe its too complicated

to figure out,

and too complicated to do!

Who is my neighbor?

Jesus' response to the lawyer's question

is so familiar to us

that nearly any of us

could tell the story.

A man is beaten,

robbed,

and left for dead.

Here comes a priest.

He passes by.

Then, here comes the Levite—

another religious official.

He, too, passes by.

It's not looking good for the preacher types.

You may have heard about the experiment

that was conducted

with students at Princeton Seminary.

(Roger may have even mentioned this

in a sermon a while back.)

The researchers gathered

a group of students in a classroom

and gave them an assignment—

Go and record a talk

about the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

The students were told that

the recordings were going to be done in a building

on the other side of the campus.

And because of a very tight schedule,

they needed to hurry to that building.

Well, it was set up ahead of time that,

on the path to the other building
 there would be an actor,
 slumped in an alley,
 coughing and suffering.

So, what do you think
 the seminary students did?
 They were on their way
 to make a presentation
 about the Good Samaritan.
 And now, all of a sudden,
 they encounter an actual person in need
 (or, an actual actor in need!).

And, in fact, almost all of them
 rushed right past the hurting person.
 One student even stepped *over* the man's body
 as he was hurrying off to teach
 about the Parable of the Good Samaritan!

(Tomas G. Long, "Meeting the Good Samaritan," Day 1 sermon for July 15,
 2007, <http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=641>).

Ouch!

Proof positive
 that the spirit of the Priest and the Levite
 is still alive.

But also proof positive of how hard it is
 to do what Jesus says.

So, back to the first century.

In Jesus' time,
 the priest and the Levite
 would have been in the list
 of top ten desirable neighbors.

And in the bottom ten,
 would have been the Samaritans.

The Samaritans
 were the disreputable
 shunned cousins.

They *had* been worshipers
 of the true God,
 but they had strayed.

So, watch
 what the despised outsider does.

His generosity
 is amazing!

Extravagant!
 Jesus uses more words
 to describe the Samaritan's giving

than he uses to tell the rest of the story.
 Oil to soften his wound.
 Wine as an antiseptic.
 The near corpse
 put on the back of the horse.

It's an incredible amount
 of generosity.

And now Jesus pulls us away
 from the road to Jericho
 and we're back in that conversation
 about neighbors.

And here is where things
 begin to get a little complicated,
 but kind of interesting.

Bear with me!

Listen very carefully
 to the question Jesus asks
 the lawyer!

"Who," asks Jesus,
 "has acted like a neighbor
to the victim?"

Did you catch that?
 Jesus has turned
 the lawyer's question
 over on its ear.

The lawyer asked,
 "Who is
my neighbor?"

But Jesus asks,
 "Who acted like a neighbor
 to the man who was hurt?"

The guy in the ditch
 is the one
 who gets to decide
 who the neighbor is.

Who was the neighbor
 to the guy in the ditch?

That's what Jesus wants to know.

You and I can get so wound up
 worrying about
 how on earth
 we will ever be good neighbors
 to all these people
 the way Jesus is telling us to.

But if we jump into that,
 we miss what Jesus has to say
 about neighbors.
 It's not about which people
 we have to help
 and which people
 we don't have to help.
 It's about the guy in the ditch,
 and about which one
 was, in fact, the neighbor
 to *him*.

The lawyer was worried
 about having to love
 too many neighbors.
 And we may worry, too.
 That could flat wear us out.
 That could burn us out—
 having that legalistic attitude
 about loving our neighbors.
 When Jesus is finished with the story,
 the question is not
 "how many neighbors do I have to love?"
 The question is,
 "Who has loved as a neighbor?"
 The neighbor
 is not the one
I'm supposed to love.
 The neighbor is the one
 who's doing the loving.
 And the one who is doing the loving
 turns out to be
 the one we least expect.

Stick with me.
 We're not done yet.
 If we let him,
 Jesus will turn our worry
 into a
 puzzled gladness.
 The neighbor is not the one
 who is a burden.
 The neighbor is the one
 who is picking people up
 and restoring people to life.
 So here is what we need to do:

Before we get all wound up with worrying
 about how we need to be Better Sams,
 what we need to do is remember
 the experience of being the one in *need*
 and of receiving aid from neighbors...
 sometimes altogether unlikely neighbors.

Once we discover
 that the most unlikely neighbor
 can have compassion on us,
 can surprise us with caring,
 and can lift us out of the ditch,
 then neighbors will never look the same again.

Think for a moment....

Who have been your Samaritans?
 What are your stories of people who,
 to your utter amazement,
 proved to be neighbors to you?

Remember the neighbors
 who have lifted you out of ditches
 and brought you to healing....

And if no one else comes to mind,
 then just remember Jesus—
 despised,
 rejected,
 an outcast and a troublemaker,
 who lived and died
 so that we might have life abundant.
 Remember how Jesus, our neighbor,
 has lifted us out of the ditch.

So, when you see a person
 by the side of the road,
 when you notice someone
 in one of life's ditches,
 stop and remember those times
 when you have been lifted out of the ditch.

There are many ways
 to love another.

Maybe we give money.
 Maybe we offer a listening ear.
 Maybe we smile and say "hello,"
 acknowledging the personhood
 of someone who is marginalized.

Maybe we simply pray.

But when we have our heads on straight

about who our neighbors *really* are—
about the ones who have cared for us
when we have been in the ditch—
I'm guessing that it will be much easier to
"Go and do likewise."

Thanks be to God.

Amen.