

The Question of Neighbor

Luke 10: 25-37

July 20, 2014

This sermon was preached by Pastor Kurt Jacobson at Trinity Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, WI

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, grace and peace be with you all.

In the next five days some between 450-500 kids, teens and adults will gather here for vacation Bible school. It's a week brimming with spirit and life. Our vacation Bible school is wholly dedicated to shaping young lives for life-long faithfulness to God and service to neighbor through God's church.

On the final morning, the kids will gather around this passage you just heard from Luke – the story of the Good Samaritan. It's a story that forces us to realize that faith isn't simply a belief we ascribe to, but something we do for the benefit of others.

So let's get right to the bible story Jesus tells. Let's first think about the people who show up.

The victim captures my attention right away. I feel for him, don't you? Beaten and left on the side of the road. Then the priest and the Levite show up. They're both upright people of faith with stature and respected in society. They pass by the victim because the rules of their faith don't permit them to assist. I raise an eyebrow of dismay at these guys, don't you? Then Jesus says a Samaritan comes along and I find myself cheering for him because he really sees the guy in need. The Samaritan stops and goes above the call of duty to tend to the victim. His faith springs into action. This guy, unlike the other two, sees a human being, a person in need, a neighbor.

The definition of "neighbor" is what got Jesus started telling this story in the first place. It was a lawyer who questioned Jesus in hopes of justifying himself – or in other words to be right with God without having to involve anyone else. So he asks Jesus: "Who is my neighbor?" That word "neighbor," -- if construed too broadly could mean a whole lot of people this guy would rather avoid.

So the lawyer does what lawyers do best -- he parses, specifies, qualifies. Who, exactly, is my neighbor? Who warrants my time and attention? Who must I care about? Who, in short, counts? The lawyer wants Jesus to qualify the definition of neighbor so he could have a clean, clear legal definition of precisely who he had to respect and care for and who didn't really matter. That way he would never have to stretch his view of who all is included in God's economy. That kind of thinking is appealing to some people, even today. Clean, clear moral imperatives create the illusion that the Christian life is primarily about following the rules, keeping oneself clean and pure because that's what's necessary to be saved.

But Jesus has something very different to say to that kind of thinking. Jesus doesn't answer the lawyer, but in turn asks: 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?'

The lawyer 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 neighbor as yourself.*'

And Jesus said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.' Then he goes on to tell about the man beaten, robbed and left alongside the road.

In Jesus' definition of neighbor - it turns out to be anyone in need. So the person of faith, who loves God must necessarily enact mercy whenever someone presents a need. Then faith in God moves from personal belief to action/doing, responding with mercy to neighbor. Why? Because according to Jesus that's what his followers.

The final episode of Seinfeld aired in 1998. In it, the four main characters (Jerry, Elaine, Kramer and George) receive a one year in state prison for failing to help someone who was robbed.

Earlier in the episode, Jerry learned he's been hired by NBC to do a sitcom. The network, as a gift, is flying Jerry, Elaine, George and Kramer to Paris in celebration. Enroute, the private jet they're on has mechanical troubles and is forced to land in Lakeland, Massachusetts. Waiting for mechanics to repair the plane, this little group of witty, wry and quirky friends are strolling the quaint New England town, when suddenly they witness a car-jacking. Watch a clip of the episode here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPnKONCn_MQ

Being the kind of people who typically make fun of others – they make fun of the man who is being robbed. Even as the victim yells for help and looks directly at this quartet of onlookers, Kramer is recording it on a video camera. They just watch. They don't shout out and they're only across the street! They just stand there. The robber speeds off with the car and the police arrive on the scene. With the excitement over, Jerry suggests they go get something to eat.

As they turn to walk off the police officers stops them. *“Alright, hold it right there.”* **Jerry:** *“Wha’?”* **Officer:** *“You’re under arrest.”* **Jerry:** *“Under arrest, what for?”* **Officer:** *“You broke the law. Article 223-7 of the Lakeland county penal code.”* **Elaine:** *“What, we didn’t do anything.”* **Officer:** *“That’s exactly right. The law requires you to help or assist anyone in danger as long as its reasonable to do so.”* **George:** *“I’ve never heard of that.”* **Officer:** *“It’s new. Its called the Good Samaritan law. Let’s go.”* (video clip ends with Jerry and friends in a jail cell and Kramer explains that the Samaritan were good people who took care of people).

The story of the Good Samaritan is Jesus way of drastically expanding the definition of neighbor – something Seinfeld and friends needed to learn. Neighbor is anyone in whom we see the opportunity to show the mercy we ourselves have experienced in Christ.

Like the lawyer of long ago, there are still people today looking for clean answers and clear instructions about what to do and not to do in order to be seen favorably by God. And there are churches that are intent upon serving up strict, black and white rules about who's in and who's not, what one has to do to be saved and never at the expense of going outside of oneself to serve a neighbor. And some people like that kind of religion, where the focus is on personal morality and individuality.

But there are others, and I find myself among them, that desperately want to be in relationship with followers of a God whose love is so broad and deep that anyone in need is welcome and worthy.

At the end of the story, Jesus says to the lawyer, “Which of these three, the priest, Levite or Samaritan, do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The lawyer said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

The call to go and do likewise is challenging and transforming. It is for us -- personally and together as a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We have a mission of living out Christ's mercy in broad ways. When we “go and do likewise” we bring God's mercy and grace to people around us who could use a hopeful, loving awareness of God and the Christian church.

This week at VBS our kids are going to learn about taking the blessings of God's mercy to their neighbors – and into all the places in which we live, work and play. I think that's incredibly hopeful and enduringly good for us – and for all our neighbors. Amen.