

“PEOPLE IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD”

**A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

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(transcribed from audio file)

Our scripture reading today comes from Luke 10:25-37, the parable of the Good Samaritan.

*And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying,
Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?
He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou?
And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy
heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy
mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.
And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou
shalt live.
But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my
neighbour?
And Jesus answering said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem
to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment,
and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.
And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when
he saw him, he passed by on the other side.
And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on
him, and passed by on the other side.
But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and
when he saw him, he had compassion on him,
And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine,
and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took
care of him.
And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and
gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and
whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.
Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that
fell among the thieves?*

*And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him,
Go, and do thou likewise. NRSV*

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In about 6 weeks my wife and I are going to be headed up to Chicago to see Oasis in concert. This means nothing to many of you, but this was a very big British Rock Band from the 90's that we were really into. The last time we got to see them in concert was a little over 25 years ago and this is really going to be a lot of fun. We're really looking forward to this.

We're definitely going to do it different than we did the first time though. The first time, I mean, we bought general admission floor seats, so just in the pit. Ok? I took the day off from work, so we went around lunchtime and camped out to get in early and it worked. We got in and we were in the front row.

And the band started playing and it was awesome, and the crowd was getting excited and they kept moving forward and moving forward. I imagined for that person who was like 50 rows back it must have been awesome to get closer and closer, but as a person in the front row I had a very different experience. One of being crushed by this crowd and what happened was, in an effort to relieve the pressure we ended up just popping back to the second row. And then as the pressure came, we popped back to the We eventually were around row, I don't know, 15, 18, 20 back. We had popped back so much, just from the shear pressure and it got to the point where we could barely breathe. All the heat. All the people. It was just the squeezing of our bodies, and my wife said to me, "I can't really breathe" and I said "I can't either. This is just awful and we gotta get out of here." And it wasn't easy to get out of the crowd.

Then I noticed the way to get out of the crowd was to crowd surf. It's the only way I saw anyone make it out. Now I had never crowd surfed before. This means I have to get lifted up and have everyone pass me out of the crowd. How are we gonna do this?

Well, right behind me was a couple of fellas from UVA who had come up and they must have been on the football team or something cause they were just grrrrr. Like my head would fit inside one of their biceps. They were huge. And they were part of the problem, to be honest. When that linebacker's dancing right behind you it's just oppressive, so then I remembered something.

The one thing that I actually remember from the one sociology class that I took in college, and it was about situations of mob mentality and it said that if you need help you don't look at a mass of people and say "Somebody. Help me!" You have to look at one individual and say, "I need your help!" And so, I thought I'm going to try to use this Jedi mind trick on this guy behind me. So, I looked around at this big guy and I put my hands on his shoulders. That got his attention, and I said "My wife can't . . ." I'm yelling cause it's a rock concert, people. "My wife can't breathe. You need to lift my wife up so she can get passed out."

And he goes "Okay!"

So, he and his buddy pick up my wife and they start passing her – and there she goes and I'm like "Aww". Then I went, "Now you need to pick me up! I need to go help her."

He went, "Okay!"

So, he just picked me up and we went. At first I was "I can breathe" and then it was kind of scary and then I'm like, "Oh my goodness. This is awesommmeee!" And when you get to the front, they dump you off. A big security guard grabs you and then they escort you off to the side and then you can just go up and sit in the seats. And that's what we did.

But the whole thing was, how do I get these people to help. I don't know if you've ever been in a situation where you desperately needed help from other people, but this is a good skill to have. And centered around this, how do you get people to help, it's exactly the lesson that we are dealing with here in this interaction between the lawyer and Jesus.

Only I don't think the lawyers really interested in how to get help for folks. What the lawyer is interested in doing is testing Jesus, using this idea of how people should or shouldn't help others. He begins by asking about eternal life and Jesus instead of just giving an answer says, "Well you know the answer." Yes, he's a lawyer. He knows the law of God and he says, "Well you should love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself."

This was a classic answer for those who knew their scriptures and knew their religion back then. It's not one simple Bible verse that was being plucked out there. It was Deuteronomy 6. It was pulling Deuteronomy to get that great Shema it's called. *To love your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind.* Then it's going into

Leviticus, chapter 19, verse 18, not the first half, but the second half to get that line, *you should love your neighbor as yourself*. Good answer.

If you look at the other gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, they all have a story where there is a need to summarize what the law is. In the other two, Jesus gives the answer. In Luke, this lawyer offers up the answer. John doesn't have this story. John is 90% original material. He's always off in some other story, but Matthew, Mark and Luke, they all tell of this summary of the law.

But see, the lawyers like, "Yeah but there's probably a limitation to this. Right? So, who is my neighbor?"

Not because he really wanted to know but because he wanted to push and prod and test. And there was a really good book answer that Jesus could have given him. It's right there in that same chapter of Leviticus. Because if you don't just pluck out that one little verse, *love your neighbor as yourself*, you actually can get the full context. So here's what leads up to that famous verse that you know now. I don't know how many Leviticus phrases you know so well, but love your neighbor as yourself is probably up there pretty high. Here's the full bit. It says in Leviticus 19:17.

Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

So, the textbook answer to, who is your neighbor? Well, my fellow Israelite. Just people from my country. That would have been an acceptable answer to this lawyer. You go and grab the lead-in from Leviticus. Yeah! That would have been good.

Now there is another possible bit you could add in that was acceptable to the teachings of that time and that's how you treat the ger. What's a ger? Well, that's a foreigner and just a couple of verses later it says this.

When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native born. Love them as yourself for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.

So, the great textbook answer that Jesus could have given this guy was, when he says who's my neighbor? Say well, your fellow Israelites and any other foreigners

that happen to be living in our country. All should be treated as neighbors and loved as we love ourselves. That's simple.

Jesus could have just quoted it. He knew the scriptures but instead, Jesus pushes it a little farther. The lawyer wants him to draw a line and Jesus says, "Eh. Let me tell you a story instead." And he tells this story of the good Samaritan.

Now that phrase alone would sound like nonsense to your average Israelite around Jesus' time. There was no such thing as a good Samaritan for Israelites at that time. Samaritans were those others. They were ethnic enemies. They were political enemies. They were religious heretics, wanting nothing to do with them. They're not the hero of any story that's told in Israel, but Jesus tells this story.

There was a man who was on the road from Jerusalem to Jerico. This road actually used to be called The Way of Blood cause it was a bad road. It was one of those roads you don't drive on, after dark, you know, cause you're scared. Yeah! It was one of those. It was not a good road.

A man. It doesn't say what nationality, what ethnicity, what religious group? It's just a man. It could be anyone. It could be the lawyer himself. It could be anyone lying, looking near dead along the side of the road.

Then along comes a priest and a Levite, both members of the holy order. They had responsibilities at the temple. They needed to keep themselves pure so that when they went to the temple, they wouldn't have to go through some elaborate ritual of cleansing to be able to do the holy good works that they do. They both walked by and leave the man injured, not helping him.

Now at this point a good lawyer as I'm sure this guy was, could have said, "Well, but you see they had a good reason because if they are going to the temple to these services they can't risk making themselves unclean, because if that's a dead body and they touch it, according to Jewish Law they would have to go through all this elaborate cleansing ceremony and that just wouldn't do.

That would be a great argument if they were on their way to the temple in Jerusalem. The problem is it tells you they were going down the road. Now that may sound like a harmless phrase to you, but the path from Jerusalem to Jerico, down means you're leaving Jerusalem. For the Israeli people if you leave a mountaintop to go to Jerusalem, you're going up to Jerusalem, because it is the Holy City. You always go up to Jerusalem. When you leave Jerusalem, you're always going down. So,

knowing they are going down the road, down from Jerusalem to Jerico, they're not going to be in charge of any holy services anytime soon. So, that excuse kinda falls by the wayside. Besides in the Jewish Law there is a special exception made that it is considered a holy act to take care of an abandoned dead body. To take care of that is a holy act. So, all the excuses for this Levite and this priest fall apart, but they do walk on by.

Honestly this would be simple like, "I don't want to have anything to do with that. This is the Way of Blood. If I go over to take care of that body, maybe their buddies are going to jump out and attack me." So, there's maybe fear or maybe, I just don't want to get involved.

But then a Samaritan comes along. You know, one of those dirty Samaritans. One of those people. The other that are our enemies, in all these different ways. One of them walks on by and yet that is the one that stops and tends to the wounds. Even going above and beyond, offer to pay for expenses as they recover.

Then he asks the lawyer, which of these was a neighbor? And then this lawyer, so filled with his bias and his prejudice against Samaritans can't even say the words, the Samaritan was. He has to say, the one who showed mercy. You see, this lawyer was asking to know, what are the limits on who I have to help and Jesus flipped it around and said, what are the limits of how we should think of the people who do the helping.

Cause who knows who that man is who was laying down in that street. It could be you, lawyer. It could be any one of us and really, being a neighbor is not a one-way street. Being a neighbor is a relationship. Who amongst these was the neighbor, lawyer? The one who showed mercy? Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! The Samaritan. You can say the word out loud. See I always have a snarky version of Jesus in my head.

Jesus wants to clearly establish to this lawyer that where you want to draw lines, even if you think you can go back to Leviticus and find a way to draw a line, I'm not going to let you draw a line. I'm going to make you admit that mercy is above any of these other things you are trying to lift up and if we do not bring mercy to the table, then how can we say we are loving the Lord our God with all our hearts, with all our soul, with all our might and our neighbor as ourself when the very next word out of our mouth is, "Yeah! But who can we exclude from this? Who can I regard as not my neighbor?" When that's the very first word out of your mouth, I think you missed the point. Jesus is just like, yeah, those people are in too. Yeah. This is extended, more and more.

Look I know that as a pastor you're really not supposed to tell stories about your kids. You're not supposed to do that too much, so I don't want to embarrass any one of my kids, but I do have this one kid of mine. He's 6'3". His name rhymes with Larson, and he just got a scholarship, but I don't want to point him out to you. But any time that we go to an Italian restaurant and you know they bring out the pasta and then they ask, "Would you like some grated cheese on that? Just tell me when." And they'll just start dumping it and this son of mine will look at me with a little smirk. He often looks at me when he does this. And they're going, just say when, and he just sits there with a little grin on his face and the cheese starts piling up. Often by the time they're done the thickness of the cheese equals the thickness of the pasta underneath. I do believe there is some compassion in his heart because when the waiter or waitress kinda slows down for a moment, after it's been going for a long time, he will say, "Okay I guess that's enough."

I kinda think Jesus is that way with us and our mercies. We're sittin' there and sayin' "Hey Jesus, just tell me when. Just tell me when I should draw a line and not extend your mercies to this person."

And I just imagine Jesus going, (and he grins). "Just say when, any time. How about Samaritans?" (Again, he grins.) "Just say when." And our God does not want to draw a line and say, when. Our God does not want to draw a line and say, who. Our God says, who is the neighbor? The one who does the mercy. Don't you want to be a neighbor? Your calling to be a neighbor is not determined by the other person. The parable didn't even have an identity. Your call to be a neighbor is on your identity. Who you are and the limit to that is like those bread sticks at those places. It's endless.

As we hear this story today, we have to resist that urge within us that wants to draw lines and say, Whoa, but surely not then. Well how much do I have to do? The point of this story is for each and every one of us to take wherever those lines are for us, wherever we have drawn lines, just push them out a little bit. You're human. You're not going to be able to serve everyone, help everyone, but Lord knows that you have drawn some lines of people that you have made in and out and what the Lord God says to you is, move the line out. Move it out, because more is what this gospel is spreading to.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and with all might and love your neighbor as yourself, and your neighbor, well that's a much bigger neighborhood than you ever knew you lived in.

May God be glorified by the way you take your concept of being a neighbor and spread that out, to not just satisfy some law, but to satisfy the law of love.

To God be the glory.
Halleluiah and Amen.