

Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift
When Neighboring is our Mission

Luke 10:25-37

THE INTRODUCTION

Scholars agree that Jewish rabbis in the time of Jesus had already started to combine the commandment in Deuteronomy to love God with one's whole self with the second found in Leviticus to love the neighbor as oneself. They saw it as a good summary of God's law.

The Gospels also portray these two commandments as complementary. In Matthew and Mark, it is Jesus who teaches this summary of the Law, but here in the gospel of Luke, it is the legal expert who has asked him the question about what is most important who puts them together. Luke's version is also the only gospel to include the parable of the Good Samaritan, attaching it to the teaching about loving God and neighbor.

At this point in Jesus' ministry, he has started to focus upon and head toward the confrontation with the authorities in Jerusalem. He has also sent the Disciples out on their first mission trip. So the stakes of following Jesus are getting higher, and the Disciples are being called upon to learn more about love and to practice it in order to carry on Jesus' mission.

I'll be reading from the Common English Bible. Let us listen to the word of God as recorded in Luke 10:25-37.

THE READING

25 A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to gain eternal life?" 26 Jesus replied, "What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?" 27 He responded, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." 28 Jesus said to him, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live." 29 But the legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30 Jesus replied, "A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He encountered thieves, who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death. 31 Now it just so happened that a priest was also going down the same road. When he saw the injured man, he crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. 32 Likewise, a Levite came by that spot, saw the injured

man, and crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. 33 A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. 34 The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, tending them with oil and wine. Then he placed the wounded man on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day, he took two full days' worth of wages and gave them to the innkeeper. He said, 'Take care of him, and when I return, I will pay you back for any additional costs.' 36 What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?" 37 Then the legal expert said, "The one who demonstrated mercy toward him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

SERMON:

After being in church school, a girl wanted to do something for her neighbors. She had recently learned how to safely operate the mower, so she came to their door, where they carried on a mission conversation. She offered to mow their front lawn, and the elderly couple accepted, saying: "Yes! How 'bout \$20?" The girl looked startled, then sad, and the tears welled up as she began to turn away. "What's wrong?!" they asked. "I've only got \$5!"

Let us pray...

When we read Luke 10, **we overhear another mission conversation**, this time between an attorney specializing in Jewish law and Jesus. A similar scene might just as easily occur between members of Tri Con this fall – say, the stewardship committee or the Transition Team or the Church Council in dialogue with each other. I'm calling these "mission conversations" because at the heart, they explore what faithful people are called *to do*."

The lawyer asked the question this way: "What should *I do* to experience life?" Then he and Jesus came to agree upon the baseline of mission: put Deuteronomy's love of God with one's whole self together with Leviticus' love of the neighbor as oneself. "Check. You got it. That's right."

They had agreed, but the legal expert – I don't know, was he just feeling his oats that day, or participating in the debate culture of his time, or tweeting about the latest hashtag? – whatever it was, the man got *more* testy at this juncture of their talk. He poked at the consensus they'd reached and asked a follow-up: "Yeh, but, who is my neighbor? Hmm?" I'm guessing you can imagine the tone.

My father-in-law and I had a brief mission conversation a long time ago. He wanted to do right and be right, about as much as I did. Donald and I were talking about the practice of tithing in the Old Testament and then in the New and Jesus' approach. Tithing is giving 10% to the church and its mission. Donald then asked me: "Yes, but 10% *of what?* Gross or net income after taxes?" Of course, the bible has no such categories, so this debate wasn't going to get us very far! Just irritated.

At that same sort of moment in *this* morning's dialogue, Jesus disarmed the man and switched the direction by telling a story. Just as the young girl's heart-felt desire to serve took all of us off guard, Jesus' parable shook his partner out of his legalism long enough to arrive at what *really* matters.

American philosopher, Richard Rorty, wrote: “the chief instrument of change is a talent for speaking differently rather than arguing well.”¹ Jesus exercised this gift, always seeking to draw us in and take us further than he finds us.

The parable has suspense and many surprises: someone going down that notoriously dangerous road between Jerusalem and Jericho; a mugging; a bleeding, barely-breathing body; a priest, a Levite, and then...Who?! A Samaritan? Through the story, Jesus amazingly gets the legal expert to root for one he would have otherwise despise as an unjustified religious immigrant!

Many worthy points could be drawn from his parable, but I’m going to concentrate on just two in hopes of contributing to our personal and congregational mission conversations.

First of all, you probably noticed that Jesus didn’t directly answer the question “*Who* is my neighbor?” You see, in asking this, the man was trying to limit the scope of his responsibility. Sometimes we hear a similar implicit question posed in churches when members debate between funding local or global mission, pitting them against one another. “*Who* is our neighbor?” But at the end of his story, Jesus asks instead: “**Who was neighbor to the man who fell among thieves?**” with the Samaritan as the obvious answer.

So what God wants us to do – our mission – Jesus underlines, is to “neighbor” those in need. He’s using “neighbor” as a *moral* category, not a geographical or cultural term. What’s more, Jesus is using it as an action word - a *verb* - not only a noun: “to neighbor.” That which is most important during our journeys to life, is for us to figuratively and literally see and neighbor those beaten up along the road.

The news this last month has been full of situations that call for Samaritans, and fortunately, the news coverage has included the stories of neighboring: neighbors in Houston who went up and down their streets in boats, offering rescue to those stranded; neighbors in Mexico City who picked up rubble by hand to free school children; neighbors in Las Vegas, both first responders and concert goers who covered and protected others from the bullets. “Go and do likewise,” Jesus says.

And what is neighboring at its heart?

Well, at Bob Baldridge’s memorial service a woman from Open Table shared that our fellow church member had been a regular volunteer. The guests called him “The Bread Man” because he served the bread, but *more than this*, she reflected, there was a *connection* between him and each one he served.

The neighbor in Jesus’ story took a risk and crossed the road to come *closer* to the half-dead man. He delayed his own plans in order to be of service, instead of just passing by. While understandable that the priest didn’t stop, since his schedule was tight, the Levite, too, because to touch a corpse was against his religion, and both afraid that robbers might still be near, Dr. King’s insight still applies: *they* said to themselves: “If I stop to help him what may happen to me?” but the Samaritan: “If I don’t stop to help him, what will happen to *him*?”²

¹Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 7. The exact quote is: “A talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well is the chief instrument of cultural change.”

²Martin Luther King, “I’ve Been to the Mountain Top,” Sermon preached at Bishop Charles Mason Temple, Memphis, TN, April 3, 1968.

I'm convinced that at the core neighboring is allowing our own vulnerability to become empathy for the victim. The neighbor's compassion – his mercy – filled in the gaps, so much so that he bandaged this man's wounds, lifted the stranger onto his own transportation, got him to an inn – the closest thing to a hospital – stayed with him as long as he could. They got much better acquainted through all this, I'm sure, and then the neighbor gave money to the serving institution as well as hands-on time to his care.

What is neighboring? It is *connecting with the Other in mercy*. *This* is loving with our *whole* selves, imperfect, frail, and limited as our help may be. When *neighboring* is our mission, we will experience true human connection and mercy will be at the heart of every outreach commitment.