

SERMON: November 11, 2018 Who Is My Neighbor?  
TEXT: Luke 10:25-37 (NRSV)  
SUBJECT: Finding peace through Christ and His family  
THEME: God calls us to love each other beyond our group identities.  
PURPOSE: To have us see “others” as people whom God loves.



Down here, we have Jericho – major city, very prosperous, crossroads of the land. Oldest continually-inhabited city on earth. Very fertile ground; it is fed by Elisha’s Spring and close to the Jordan River, and was the center of trade and industry.

Up here, 18 miles up the mountain, is Jerusalem. The Holy City, center of religion and power. It’s up in the mountains, so not as many things grow there. Olives, almonds, figs – but not a whole lot else. For those things you need to go down to Jericho and find oranges, dates, grapes, spices – today, bananas are a huge crop.

It was a major caravan route – but it was also dangerous. There was safety in numbers.

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<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e6/OldRoadFromJerusalemToJericho.jpg>

There wasn’t just one path up and down the mountain. As a matter of fact, the first part of the descent from Jerusalem wasn’t paved for a long time. There were many meandering paths, each following a different contour of the mountains, until they finally met up about 3 miles away from Jericho.

Each of these paths held advantages and disadvantages. Some might be shorter and easier, but were more likely to contain bandits. And the government couldn’t just get rid of the bandits, because whenever they would see soldiers coming, they would just hide in the thousands of caves and wait until the troops passed by.

Besides, the Romans weren’t really aware of what happened to the common people. Roman citizens would likely have an armed guard with them, so they were never attacked, so in their mind there wasn’t a bandit problem at all!

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So merchants would load up on their goods down in Jericho, go up the mountain to Jerusalem, do their trading, and then come back down the mountain laden with cash to buy more goods down in Jericho.

So we enter the story -

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***"...a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"***

I have to admit, most of the time I see this lawyer as an adversary, as someone trying to trap Jesus and manipulate His words to use against them. But really, there is no indication in the story that that's what he was trying to do.

What it seems that he is really trying to do is to justify himself. He's not interested in proving Jesus wrong; just trying to get Jesus to say that he is right.

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You can see this in his first question – "Teacher, what must I do to INHERIT eternal life?"

An inheritance is not something you earn, it's something you are given. You don't have to DO anything to receive it! It's usually the accidental benefit you get from being related to somebody!

You can LOSE it by being a jerk, but usually it's seen as something you get just from being who you are.

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In this sense, what the lawyer is asking is, "What can I do to make sure that I don't have to worry ever again?" Or, you could ask it, "What's the least I can do and still get into heaven?"

"What's the least I can do, and still stay married?"

This lawyer is asking a question about his STANDING – "Am I okay with God? If not, I want to do something. If so, I don't want to change anything. Do I have my fire insurance paid up?"

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But Jesus answers the question differently – "What do you see in the scriptures?"

This sounds like a legitimate question, but the answer that the lawyer gives is almost a recitation from a first-grader – ***"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."***

He's saying the words, but is he really living by it?

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Years ago I had a man in one of my churches who was just harsh about everything. Everything was either straight black or white with him. He couldn't comprehend other people's point of view; there was only one way to do things, and it was his.

I was trying to understand him better – you know, get to know why he was like he was – and so one day I asked him when he felt closest to God.

He said, without hesitation, “When I got my perfect attendance pin in Sunday School.”

And my heart broke for him. Somehow he had gotten the idea that all God wants from us is obedience – nothing more. His life exhibited an attitude that his religion was all about making sure that he had done what he had to do so that God would have to let him into heaven.

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This was the attitude of this lawyer, who had memorized the scriptures and the Law so that he could prove to God that he deserved to be there!

But God wants so much more for us! ***Heaven is not a place we go to after we die, but living in God's presence for eternity, starting today!***

If your religion is all about doing the right things because you want to be rewarded in heaven after you die, then you have missed the joy that God wants for you to have right now! Heaven is not a destination; it's a journey!

But there is hope for this lawyer. As Jesus says, “Yes, you have said the right words,” something within this lawyer nudged him. He knew that it was not enough. This is what we call “Prevenient grace” in the United Methodist Church – the Holy Spirit working within us before we even yet understand, drawing us to Himself.

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The lawyer, feeling uncomfortable and still wanting to be assured that he was on the right path, asks the famous question,

***“Who is my neighbor?”***

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Hospitality is very important to the oriental peoples. Making somebody feel safe and welcome in your presence is of primary importance to them.

But it gets exhausting trying to care for everybody, and so, over the years, this idea of being “neighborly” began to shrink.

God tells the Jews early in their history to always look out for the migrants, the sojourners, those who are wandering or fleeing their homeland. There were no exceptions. They were to take in the traveler into their own homes and care for them and offer them grace. Many times in the scripture we hear of the Jews being welcomed and given shelter by people who were not of their nationality, and God gave them a decree to treat others that way, too.

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But as time went on, they began to be listen less to the voice of God and more to the voice of fear. They began to view foreigners and migrants with suspicion instead of welcome. They trusted less and less in God to protect them, and more and more in their own power and strength and military and government.

So by this time here, with this encounter between the lawyer and Jesus, the idea of “neighbor” (meaning, “the one that I must be hospitable to”) had shrunk from God’s original meaning of all humanity to now mean “just the people of my own nationality”. It no longer meant “whom should I welcome”, but “whom can I exclude?”

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So Jesus offers a story – and one that was immensely insulting, offensive, and probably drove many people away. I can’t state strongly enough how offensive this story is! The people hearing this, and probably the disciples themselves, would have literally called into question whether they ever wanted to be with Jesus again! We are so used to it that we don’t think twice about it. But it calls into question everything the Jews had come to believe. It’s the story that we call “The Good Samaritan”.

***"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.***

Okay, at this point in the story the people listening would have said, “Oh, yeah – I know what He means! That’s a dangerous road! I’ve travelled that road myself!”

They’re into this. They get it. They’re right with Jesus. He has them at this point.

***<sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.***

Now, this is unexpected. This is not what they expected to hear. Surely a priest would have stopped to help.

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Here in the story (and remember, this is just a story. It’s not a news report. Jesus wasn’t saying that this actually happened; He’s telling a story to make a point).

Here in the story we hear that the priest is coming DOWN the mountain. This means that he has finished whatever duties he had to do up in Jerusalem and is on his way home down in Jericho.

You can think of it like a fire department – people don't live at the station the whole time. They are on for a week and off for a week, or however their schedule works.

Here at the Temple the priests would take turns being "Priest In Charge", and be there for about a week or so and then spend time at home. Depending upon how many priests there were, they might only have to be there one week per month.

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If he were going UP the mountain TO Jerusalem, that would mean that he was probably going on duty. And the prohibitions against touching dead bodies meant that, if he even brushed up against a person who was dead (as this man appeared to be), he would be unable to serve as high priest for the week and the people would not be able to worship.

I can almost understand that. But Jesus says that he was coming DOWN the mountain – so his duty must be done! Now he's just an ordinary person, with no good reason to stop and help this guy.

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Maybe he thought it was a trap. Maybe he just wanted to get home. He doesn't have the excuse that he didn't see the man, because Jesus says that he passed by on the OTHER side.

That indicates to me that, when he saw the person lying there, he went DOWN THE VALLEY and UP THE OTHER SIDE to walk on the path that was on the other side of the ravine! He went out of his way to avoid coming near this person!

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Break for a minute – how would you feel if this was you? What if you were in an accident right here in front of the church, here on Barfield, and you saw me come out of the church, take one look at you and get into my car and drive away?

This was starting to upset people – "No, Jesus, You've got it wrong. The priest would have helped. He would have been the hero."

But that's not what Jesus said. He went on, ***"<sup>32</sup>So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side."***

At first, the people's hopes went up. "Oh, good! The church custodian! They're good people. Yes, this is a story that we can believe in."

But what did the Levite do? Passed by on the other side.

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At this point, people were getting nervous. This story is not going the way they want it to! The good people (the priest and the Levite) are supposed to be the heroes of the story, but they're not. So where is Jesus going with this?

And then, Jesus drops a bombshell – ***33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'***

At this point, Jesus lost the crowds. They would have been so incensed that they could have even taken up stones to throw at Jesus, and no one would have blamed them!

We need to understand that Samaritans were viewed as a disease, a blight, a stain on this good country that they (the Jews) loved. It goes back 750 years to a time when the Assyrians were attacking Israel, and the Jews in Samaria (the lower lands to the north) made peace treaties with them to survive rather than be deported.

As a result, the Jews that were deported considered the Jews that remained to be traitors and wanted to cut them out of the family tree. The Samaritans remained and intermarried with the other refugees that the Assyrians sent to live there, so the idea of “polluting the blood line” was also a reason to hate them.

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In doing some research about the relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans, I found an article on one of the DNA websites that studies the genes of different peoples.

What they were saying was that, from DNA samples of Jews today and these supposed “Samaritans”, their genes are almost identical! Whatever “pollution” the Samaritans supposedly did, the rest of the Jews did, also! They have the same gene trait markers!

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***So why did Jesus make a Samaritan the hero of His story?***

***And what is He saying to us today?***

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I think Jesus intended for this lawyer to put himself in this story. “You are the wounded man. You think that you have standing; you think that you have got it made.

“But when you are lying, bleeding in the ditch, whom do you want to save you? Will you ask for their green card? Will check to see their country club membership?

“Or will you accept whomever I send gratefully, and let Me heal you through them?”

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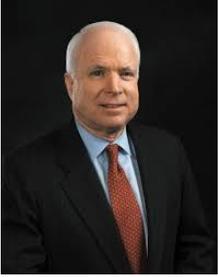
I think God is asking the same question of us - "Whom will you let be your neighbor?"

In a world of mistrust and anxiety and others telling us that we need to fear anything that's different –

Jesus tells us to stop, and look around, and love.

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On Veteran's Day, I would like to honor an American veteran, John McCain. He said this:



[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/47/John\\_McCain\\_official\\_photo\\_portrait.JPG](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/47/John_McCain_official_photo_portrait.JPG)

**Our shared values define us more than our differences. And acknowledging those shared values can see us through our challenges today if we have the wisdom to trust in them again.**

We have more that unites us as human beings than divides us. We have more good neighbors than we realize.

Jesus says that my neighbor is not based upon who has the same skin color as me, or nationality or education immigration status. My neighbor is the one who shows grace to me when I am lying in the ditch.

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So, two questions:

***Who has been a neighbor to you? And***

***Who needs you to be a neighbor to them?***