

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, July 13, 2025

The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11:00 am

+

A Sermon by

The Rev. Preston Gonzalez-Grissom

on

Luke 10:25-37

+

Who is My Neighbor?

Our Gospel reading this morning offers us the famous parable of “The Good Samaritan.” Only, the word good doesn’t appear in the reading. Rather, the Samaritan is called *compassionate*.

A better name for it may be “The Self-justifying Lawyer and the Compassionate Samaritan”, though, I admit that is far less catchy.

We’re told the lawyer correctly answers Jesus that “to love God and our neighbor” leads to eternal life. But Saint Luke adds “seeking to justify himself” the lawyer asks, “And who is my neighbor?” Who is my neighbor? To whom do I owe this love?

This is a good question. In the Bible, the Hebrew word for neighbor means something like “one who lives in the land next to mine.” So, the question is legitimate, where should he place the boundary of neighborly love: to those who live nearby? Fellow Jews? Are Romans included?

For us, who is my neighbor? Certainly I should owe a different level of care to my family, my friends, those in my religious community, my work, my city, my country?

Certainly we are not responsible to care for someone we have never met the same as a family member, where should I place the boundary of neighborly love? Who is my neighbor?

As he tends to do, Jesus responds to the question with a parable. A priest, a levite, and a Samaritan walk into a bar. No he doesn’t say that but it’s not that dissimilar.

Jesus says there was a man on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho who was robbed, beaten, stripped, and left almost dead.

By chance, a priest walked up... but he passed on the other side. Why did the man pass on the other side? Now, I know I am biased, but let us be a little empathetic to the character of the priest. Maybe he had somewhere to go, had a gathering to attend, didn’t want to be inconvenienced, maybe he was worn out from a long day of work. Who among us couldn’t empathize with that?

We live in a world now where we see tragedy so often, it can even be a healthy practice to fast from seeing such suffering, if even for a short time.

Maybe it's specific, more religious even. The priest is in charge of sacrifices, it is very important for him to be ritually pure and touching blood would certainly make him impure. Some of us get disgusted by blood, and we cannot help what your body gets disgusted by.

Although we can empathize with the priest character, a little Biblical insight reveals he is without excuse.

In the Hebrew Bible, in the Law, which the character of the Priest and the lawyer would know, There is the rule of *pikuach nefesh* "saving' a life," which means that someone should break a law in order to save a life. Jesus references this when he says "should not a man save a donkey if he fell in a well even on the Sabbath?" The Talmud, a collection of writings teaching how to follow the Law in more detail, says one is required to save a child if a wall has fallen on them.¹ So, the priest is without proper excuse.

Jesus also says in the parable the Priest is going *from* Jerusalem, meaning he already did his priestly duties and there are many cleansing pools along the way, so he could have helped the needy man and cleansed immediately after.

We do not know why he doesn't act, only that he crosses on the other side. He avoids the man altogether.

Then comes the Levite and he gets closer. We're told he "looked on him" then goes to the other side.

Maybe he doesn't have money, maybe feels inadequate, he is just a helper at the Temple after all, maybe he is afraid, this road is well-known to have robbers. The Levite doesn't seem to know this man at all, maybe he is a wanted thief and member of a group of gangsters. Maybe he got close enough to see the man, and looking nothing like him, his unconscious bias kicked in.

Maybe he was simply too busy. I mean, who has the time? We live in a society now where many work more than 40 hours. After chores, maybe children, friends, especially in New York City.

We live segmented lives, too busy for unplanned stops.

We live in what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls "liquid modernity" where our social interactions and relationships are so fleeting that we can opt in and out of helping each other like water moves to the path of least resistance. We don't know why the Levite doesn't act, only that he gets close enough to the problem and then avoids it.

Last is the Samaritan, after whom the parable is named. In a story answering "Who is my neighbor" the Samaritan is an unwelcome guest. Samaritans would not have had land near the lawyer, they're more to the north. Samaritans have a long history of intra-religious conflict with other Jewish sects. Historian Josephus says in year 6, a group of Samaritans came into the Temple and scattered bones everywhere.² This is not what a scholar in the Jewish Law would've wanted to hear.

¹ Yoma 84 b offers a full discussion on many details in the case of a wall falling on someone.

² Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, vol. 1, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library 433 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), 27,

https://www.loebclassics.com/view/josephus-jewish_antiquities/1930/pb_LCL433.27.xml.

But the Samaritan character approaches and he is the only one who we get emotion or reason from. Saint Luke writes he was “moved with compassion.” And possibly a trade merchant just going from town to town just trying to make a living which could be why he has wine and oil to dress the wounds of the hurting man. Then he brings the man to an inn and cares for him until the morning when he tells the innkeeper to look after him and he will be back later on to pay whatever is needed.

By this point it is clear that the needy man, almost dead on the side of the road, was a neighbor.

But, as the parable comes to a close Jesus asks the lawyer, “of these three, who was the neighbor?” The lawyer answers “the one who showed mercy on the man who was in desperate need.”

A seed of beauty in this parable is hidden in the character of the needy man himself. We know much about the travelers: one’s a priest coming from Jerusalem, one is a Levite who got close but not too close, the other is a Samaritan, who was moved with pity and had wine and oil on him. But we know absolutely nothing about the needy man.

In the ancient world people are identified, similar to now, by their social class, and religious and cultural background, which is easily identified by two things: their clothes and their accent.

This needy man is stripped of his clothes and beaten almost to death, likely unable to speak.

There is nothing identifiable about this man. What tribe he is from, whether he is from a well-off family, what language he speaks, if he has committed violent crimes, all we know is he is in need. And Jesus says that person is your neighbor whom you owe your love to. So, who is my neighbor? It is anyone in need... anyone.

But Jesus doesn’t stop there.

In the parable we see that anyone in desperate need is a neighbor whom we must love, but Jesus then flips the question entirely. The lawyer asked, “Who is my neighbor?” But Saint Luke tells us why he asked it: *“he was seeking to justify himself.”*

He wasn’t asking, “Whom must I love?” He was asking, “Whom can I still avoid loving?” The question beneath the question is: Who is *not* my neighbor?

But Jesus doesn’t answer on those terms. Instead, he tells a parable. And then, Jesus changes the question. Jesus does not ask, “Was the man in the ditch your neighbor?” He asks, “Which of *these three* was a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?”

The lawyer wants to define the object of neighborliness—Who counts? But Jesus wants him to consider whether he himself is acting as a neighbor. Or to put it simply: The question isn’t “Who is my neighbor?” but “Am I being a neighbor?”

It’s not the outsider, not the man in the ditch, not even the Samaritan who needs to justify himself. It’s the lawyer.

And when the lawyer answers that the neighbor was “the one who showed mercy,” Jesus doesn’t say, “Now you understand,” He says, “Go and do likewise.”

The neighbor is not the well-wisher but the one who acts. Is there someone in your life, your daily travel, maybe a call away, maybe someone the Spirit is bringing up right now? Who will you be a neighbor to today?

Maybe you're realizing you have been trying to save someone and you're realizing it's become more about you than them. You're invited to let someone else, an innkeeper, care for them until you can return later.

We do not have to be perfect at this. You *inherit* eternal life, you do not *earn* it.

In this season after Pentecost, let me remind you that those in Christ are empowered by the Holy Spirit, and today you have been given the Green Light of the Good Samaritan. Go and do likewise. Amen
