

Luke 10:29-37

Who Really Is my Neighbor?

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This month our worship theme is Neighbor. The Bible has a great deal to say about how we should treat our neighbors. 5 of the 10 commandments address the way we treat our neighbors. (Only four of them talk about God.) For centuries Jews and Christians have learned that the central tenet of our faith is to love God with our heart and soul, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus said that the way you treat your neighbors is a sign of how you feel about God. For in as much as you have done it unto the least of your neighbors you have done it to Christ, himself. Dozens of Bible characters have wrestled with this requirement. How do you love your neighbors as yourself? Some people are hard to live with, never mind love.

It is all pleasant until you actually think about the people on your block. Some fit seamlessly into your life. They seem to know your boundaries and tell how much friendship you want or need over the fence. Other people are oblivious. They send their children over all the time. Or they seem to have their own agenda. No matter how sweet they seem on the outside, you can sense that they are very competitive underneath. The whole time they talk to you they are sizing you up. You feel like they always want something from you. Even if you prove to be a good neighbor to the people on your street, where does it end.? It is work to be a neighbor. Are you supposed to be good to the folks in your school district, or the whole town? Does God expect you to be good to people in Brookline or Boston too? Where do you draw the line? What constitutes a neighbor?

Christ's disciples had similar questions. Jesus advocated neighborly love so often that one day a lawyer decided to push back and ask Jesus for clarification. "We all understand that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, but who exactly is my neighbor?" that is how this passage started in Luke. The lawyer's question prompted a story- one of the most profound and prominent stories that Jesus ever told; the story of the Good Samaritan.

Everybody has heard of the Good Samaritan. We all know what it means, right? Most of us assume that we need to be kind to people, especially those who are in an emergency situation. The first church I served was in Winchester. One of our members was Gilbert Hood who started Hood Milk company. At his funeral in the eulogy it was mentioned that Mr. Hood had come up with the idea of the Hood Samaritan, a van that trolled the highway looking for stranded vehicles. The story of the Good Samaritan is so well known that you could play with the name of it and people would understand. Most people are so familiar with this parable that they admire people who are kind to those who have been left by the side of the road. There is nothing wrong with this interpretation. But I think Jesus is really saying something else here.

Let's look at this familiar story in light of the question that prompted it. Who is my neighbor? Let's see if we can figure out what Jesus was really saying, and what it means for us today.

**Jesus says you may be surprised to discover who your real neighbors are.**

The people listening to Jesus were Jewish. They would have identified with the man who had been accosted on the road, beaten and left for dead. As they listened they would have been cringing, and making mental notes- "Whoa. That is awful. That could have been me. I know that road. I will be careful when I use that road." Then when Jesus mentioned the priest and the Levite who passed by on the other side folks listening would have shaken their heads in dismay. Then when Jesus mentions a Samaritan people would assume the worst. They would be

suspicious of a Samaritan. You could never trust a Samaritan. The crowd would expect a Samaritan came over to see if there was anything left to steal, or kick you, to add insult to your injury.

The real shock is not that the Samaritan came over to have a look, but that he had pity, and then he spent his own oil and wine to clean the man's wounds. The real surprise is that the Samaritan took time to bandage the Hebrew's wounds, and cared enough to take him to an inn. Now if you are a Jew listening to Jesus you would not know what to think. You are in new territory now, because nobody in their right mind trusts a Samaritan. There is no such thing as a Good Samaritan. That is an oxymoron.

The Samaritans traced their own roots back to Moses. They were neighbors to the North. Devout themselves, they objected to the building of the temple in Jerusalem, and saw Jews as break away heretics. Living side by side, Samaritans and Jews fought bitterly. Most Jews avoided walking through Samaria when they journeyed, even if it meant going way out of their way.

When the lawyer asks Jesus – Who is my neighbor? Christ replies with an unlikely story about a Good Samaritan. It must have left the disciples scratching their heads. That the point. Jesus says you don't know who your neighbor is, sometimes. It may surprise you to discover who your neighbor is. But Jesus says be open to surprises.

This story of Jesus is amazingly relevant today. At the end of a week when four US officials were killed at the Libyan embassy in Benghazi among them the US Ambassador Christopher Stevens and a Navy SEAL from nearby Winchester, it is hard to remember that Jesus tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves. It is easier to hunker down and grow fearful, much easier than to reach out to the stranger. At the end of a week where armed demonstrations rocked 20 Arab countries in protest to a film that derides the Muslim prophet

Mohammed, it is easy to feel nervous and isolated. Like the disciples long ago, we listen to Christ's story and wonder who our neighbors are in this global village we call home. Who can we trust? At least we know who we cannot trust. Then comes Jesus, provoking us with a story about an enemy who was merciful. Here comes Jesus reminding us to be open to the stranger. Here comes Jesus telling us to see even our enemies as children of God, capable of surprisingly human responses. Here comes Jesus expanding the notion of neighbor.

In the Metro section of the Boston Globe there was a picture on Friday of people at a peace vigil in Harvard Square Thursday night following the attack on the American consulate in Libya. The camera caught the picture of a Muslim woman from Brookline wearing her headscarf Heiam Alsawahli, and her twins Silla and Deema Alawa. All three carried American flags and candles. The children held signs that read, "Our prayers go out to the families of Ambassador Stevens and the three US officials."

Who is my neighbor? Jesus says- You may be surprised. People from many backgrounds, many faiths, many races and many different countries may turn out to be lovely neighbors.

Ten years ago Harvard professor Diana Eck wrote a book entitled A New Religious America. She reported there are more Muslims in this country now than Jews, Episcopalians or Presbyterians. Los Angeles is home to the greatest variety of Buddhists in the world.

"Members of the world's religions live not just on the other side of the world but in our neighborhoods; Hindu children go to school with Jewish children; Muslims, Buddhists, and Sikhs work side-by-side with Protestants and Catholics. This new religious diversity is now a Main Street phenomenon, yet many Americans remain unaware of the profound change taking place at every level of our society, ...in small-town Nebraska as well as New York City. Islamic centers and mosques, Hindu and Buddhist temples, ...can be found in virtually every major

American metropolitan area. There are Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists in Salt Lake City, Utah; Toledo, Ohio; and Jackson, Mississippi. “

Most of us assume that there is no precedent what we face in America today. But centuries ago something remarkable happened in Spain. In 711A.D the Muslim military forces gained control of Spain. The new rulers set up a policy of toleration toward Jews and Christians where everyone could practice their religion but not convert others. The Spanish called the community – *Convivencia*. For the next 700 years Christians, Jews and Muslims would trade political control of the region but the people would remain multi-religious, living as neighbors, listening to each other's bells and calls to prayer and using three languages of worship. Culture flourished and great libraries were built in Toledo full of Arabic books on medicine, philosophy side by side with Jewish mysticism and Christian theological tomes. <sup>[1]</sup>

The Samaritan goes far beyond mercy. This Samaritan was more than kind. He was a hero. He did not give up on the man by the road. He gave himself to the man. He used his donkey to take the wounded man to an inn, and left money for his full recovery. Jesus says that sometimes a stranger will even save you.

When I was in Jerusalem I had an encounter that I will never forget. I was in the Arab section of the city alone. On a busy corner many people were passing in several directions. I tried to be sure that I did not step in front of anyone. I had learned that many Arab men do not give women the right of way. I don't pretend that it is easy negotiating all these cultural exchanges. Most Arab men won't look at a woman, but one good man walked right in front of me, and under his breath with a sideways glance he said clearly, “You are welcome here.” I was stunned, and I was touched.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Bass, Dorothy Butler. A People's History of Christianity: the Other Side of the Story. New York: Harper one, 2009. P. 124-125

This month I am recommending a new book entitled – My Neighbor's Faith. It contains lots of stories about how people of faith are learning to be neighbors with people they always saw as strangers. One story comes from Brian McLaren. McLaren is an Evangelical who started a non-denominational Christian church in Washington DC and now is a speaker who tours the world. But when he was in graduate school he moved into an apartment and his first friend was an 8 year old named Armin. Armin was in a hurry, and needed McLaren's bathroom badly. Armin was not in the habit of knocking, but he soon spent a lot of time at McLaren's house. Clearly he wanted to be friends. Armin came to the US from Iran with his mother. When they arrived his father left them. McLaren had grown up thinking you should be only nice enough to Muslims so you could convert them, but before long Armin had converted him to a different view of friendship. The child never learned to knock, but McLaren was won over by his precocious smile and need for friendship. McLaren writes, He was always ready to be my neighbor as long as I remembered not to lock my door.

Who is my neighbor? Jesus says you may be surprised.