



Central Peninsula Church

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Whose Neighbor Am I?

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

Every so often, something happens which forces us to expand our categories. Consider what happened to Dodie Gadiant, a school teacher who decided to travel across America alone in a truck with camper in tow. One afternoon while rounding a curve on I-5 in rush hour traffic, her water pump blew up. She was left alone on the side of the road – tired and scared. In spite of the many cars around her, no one seemed interested in helping. Finally, leaning against her trailer, she prayed, “Please God, send me an angel ... preferably one with mechanical experience.” Within four minutes, a huge Harley drove up, ridden by an enormous man with long, black hair, a beard, and several tattoos. With an air of confidence, he jumped off his bike and, without even looking at Dodie, went to work on the truck. The entire time, Dodie was too dumbfounded to talk, especially when she read the words, “Hell’s Angel’s,” on his back. As he finished his task, she got up enough courage to carry on a conversation and say, “Thanks so much.” He couldn’t help but notice her surprise at the whole ordeal. Finally, he looked her in the eye and mumbled, “Don’t judge a book by its cover. You may not know who you’re talking to.” With that, he smiled, closed the hood, and straddled his Harley. With a wave he was gone as fast as he appeared.

Sometimes we come to God with questions and needs and he responds to us in ways we never could have guessed. In doing so, he forces us to expand our categories of what he and other people are like; our basic assumptions are blown apart by a God who meets our need in a totally unexpected way.

Such was the case in Luke 10 where Jesus was questioned by an expert in the Jewish law. This lawyer or scribe, as he was called, came to Jesus with what appeared to be some important questions. But beneath the surface of those questions lay certain assumptions that badly needed correction. This encounter begins in v. 25 and includes two movements. Both take pretty much the same shape – they begin with the scribe asking Jesus a question and end with Jesus issuing him a command. Let’s begin by reading the first movement.

“And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, ‘Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ And He said to him, ‘What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?’ And he answered, ‘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.’ And He said to him, ‘You have answered correctly; DO THIS AND YOU WILL LIVE’” (vv. 25-28).

I. THE SCRIBE ASKS JESUS HOW TO INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE 10:25-28

This man came to Jesus with what seems like a good question. But, before we read the question, Luke reveals this man’s motive – he was testing Jesus. He wasn’t interested in discovering the truth but rather hoped to reveal some flaw in Jesus’ thinking. Remember how Jesus just got done praising God for revealing himself to “little children” rather than “the wise and intelligent.” Well, this man represents the latter. Through his question he probably hoped to prove once and for all that Jesus was morally soft; that he didn’t hold the correct opinion that eternal life came through obedience to the law.

But Jesus didn’t bite. Instead, he presented the lawyer with a counter-question, “*What does it say in the law? How does it read?*” It must have taken this man back to be treated like a schoolboy. In essence, Jesus says, “This is a question you ought to know. What does the law say? Haven’t you read it?”

But this scribe shows some remarkable insight in his response. He combines two commandments, the first coming from Deuteronomy and the second from Leviticus; love God with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself. He seemed to know that it was about more than just a mechanical observance of the law; it was about relationship; and it started with loving God. And Jesus commends him for his answer, and then promises that if he kept these commands as a way of life, then he would indeed live.

So the first movement ends, it seems, with the two men on the same wave length. They could both leave now with a mutual pat on the back. But, all of a sudden this lawyer begins to reflect a bit more on what Jesus had just said: “*Do this and you will live.*” He begins to think of these words in relation to that second commandment about loving one’s neighbor as oneself. He’s uneasy about that commandment. He thinks of that colleague of his he had hated and envied that very morning because he was more successful than he. He thinks of the poor beggar he had shooed away from the sidewalk the day before. “Enough of that!” he thought. And then he did what I’ve seen so many people do when

God puts his finger on them about something – he raises a controversial question. How many times have we come face to face with a clear command of Scripture, but instead of obeying it, we start a discussion group? If we talk about it long enough, maybe we can bend the command to fit our lives rather than bend our lives to fit it.

II. THE SCRIBE ASKS JESUS WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR 10:29-37

“But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” (v. 29). This was a question that was often debated by the religious leaders of Jesus’ day. It was generally agreed that the command to love one’s neighbor applied only to loving fellow Jews. Some even excluded Jews who were personal enemies. The Pharisees went so far as to say that it only applied to people who kept their rules. The rabbis had a saying: all heretics, informers, and renegades should be “pushed into a ditch and not pulled out.” So you can see that this lawyer is not only trying to raise a controversy, he’s also trying to still the voice of his guilty conscience by raising questions about how far we can really take this command to love our neighbor. I mean, a law like that has to be defined, doesn’t it? We could take that way too far!

Jesus will respond to this man’s question just as he did earlier, by asking him a question of his own. But, in order to set up his question, he tells him a story first. It’s a familiar story.

”Jesus replied and said, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.’” Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands?” (vv. 30–36).

Jesus begins by introducing “a certain man.” A Jewish audience would assume that he was a Jew.

While this man was on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho he was abducted by some thugs. This is no surprise. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous. It was a 17 mile journey. It was nothing like our beautiful 17 mile drive on the Monterey Peninsula. The road to Jericho was cut through a dry and barren desert and it was known for its thieves. One of these thieves “*stripped him and beat him and left him half dead.*” To be “half dead” meant to be right next to death. The man was probably unconscious.

The first character to come on the scene after the abduction was a priest. Priests were religious professionals who served the temple in Jerusalem. They were often found on that road because many of them lived in Jericho and, after working at the temple in Jerusalem, they would return home on it. Most likely he would have been riding on a donkey. Jesus says that he came upon the unconscious man, saw him, and passed by. We aren’t told why he passed him by, but we can assume that he rationalized his actions on the basis of his religious scruples. The law prohibited any contact with a dead man. Since the man was unconscious, for all the priest knew he was dead, or at least might die in his arms. If he stopped to help the man, he would be declared ritually unclean and would have to go through the humiliating process of being cleansed in order to serve the temple again.

The thought may have crossed his mind that the law said he should love his neighbor, but he was able to push that aside with the same question the lawyer asked earlier, “Who is my neighbor? This fellow who might not even be a Jew at all. This fellow might himself be a thug or a drunk. This fellow might jeopardize my ability to fulfill my God-given ministry.” Isn’t it funny how many rationalizations we can come up with when we’re trying to duck something we know we should do? It’s been said, “The road to hell is not paved merely with good intentions but with good reasons.”

So it was with good reasons that the priest passed by “*on the other side.*” Having seen him once, he didn’t want to see him again. He cuts a path to the other side because the sight of him might shout down all his good reasons. Love seizes the eyes first. If I close my eyes, my conscience is allowed to fall asleep.

The next one to show up was a Levite. Levites were religious professionals as well, but the laws governing their behavior weren’t quite as strict as Priests, and so after seeing the man he approached him. But, in the end his actions were the same – he too passed by on the other side. His reasons were much the same as the Priest’s were, with one exception. Those who have traveled that road tell us that the Levite would have known that the Priest was traveling ahead of him. He would have been aware that the Priest who was of a higher rank than he had passed the man by. “If he didn’t do it, why should I?” Most of us tend to imitate others in these matters. If someone ahead of us

gives to a beggar, we're prone to as well, especially if they're someone we respect.

At this point in the story, the lawyer would have loved this story. As a lawyer he wasn't a religious professional, but a layman. And along with many other laymen of his day, he would have held a certain contempt for both Priests and Levites. Thus far Jesus is just reinforcing his opinions of them. And no doubt he expected the next person on the scene, the hero of the story, to be a layman like himself. He's beginning to like Jesus. But Jesus lays this story out like a booby trap. At first it looks harmless, but then it explodes and buries its shrapnel in your soul.

Jesus says that a Samaritan showed up. This is the surprise twist in the story. The Jews hated Samaritans and vice versa! They were cursed in the synagogues. Daily prayers were offered that the Samaritans would not be partakers of eternal life. Jews often said they would rather eat the flesh of swine than eat bread with a Samaritan. Jesus had just been turned away from a Samaritan village because he was a Jew. What he does here can be likened to going to Israel today and telling a story in which a Palestinian is the hero. This takes guts!

Notice he "came and saw" too, but he broke the pattern and instead of passing by, he "*felt compassion.*" His heart was moved. He had all the same reasons as the Priest and the Levite to write the man off. The Samaritans accepted the law of Moses and the rules about touching dead people too. He could have rationalized away the need to consider a hated Jew his neighbor. But, instead he acted compassionately.

First, he helped by softening the man's wounds with oil, disinfecting them with wine, and placing bandages on them. Then he placed the man on his donkey and led him down the road towards an inn where they checked in and spent the night. In doing this, he was exposing himself to great risk. The closest inn would have been in Jericho. What would people think as they saw this Samaritan walking into Jericho with this half-dead Jew on his donkey? That's like a Plains Indian in 1875 walking into Dodge City with a scalped cowboy on his back, and then checking into a room over the local saloon for the night! No doubt the people of Jericho would blame the Samaritan and retaliate. The smart thing to do would be to simply carry him into town and leave him. But this Samaritan is willing to risk and even suffer if need be.

But that's not all. He also gives the innkeeper two denarii for the man's care and promises to return to take care of any further expenses. Two denarii was a lot of money. It allowed the man to stay at the inn for at least a month. His promise to return to pay the debt was important because the wounded man could be imprisoned for not paying his debt. This Samaritan has gone far beyond what mere duty would call for. His compassion expressed itself in a willingness to stop, expose himself to the risk of suffering, and pay an extravagant price for this man's welfare.

After the story, Jesus finally gets around to his question: "*Which of the three proved to be a neighbor?*" Jesus has turned the question around. The lawyer had asked, "*Who is my neighbor?*" Jesus asks, "*Whose neighbor are you?*" In turning this question around, Jesus forces us to change our perspective. The issue that love concerns itself with is not "Who is my neighbor?" Rather the question that love concerns itself with is, *to whom am I a neighbor?* Who is in need and looks at me as a neighbor? The emphasis on proving to be a neighbor. Love is something that can't be theorized about it; it can only be proven by our actions.

In reply to Jesus' question, all the lawyer can say is, "*The one who showed mercy toward him.*" Once again, he and Jesus are on the same wave length. But the man is humbled now. He doesn't proudly recite from the law as he did in v. 27. His answer is brief. He's been beaten at his own game. He's been forced to face the inconsistency of his own prejudice. But he still can't bring himself to say, "*The Samaritan.*" He just refers to the one who showed mercy.

Jesus responds as he did earlier with a command: "*Go and do the same.*" We don't know how the lawyer responded to that command. What we're left with is a story that leaves a powerful impression on us. What can we learn from this story?

III. APPLICATIONS

First, this story makes a statement about how we inherit eternal life. It shows us that ultimately religion fails as a means to salvation. By "religion" I mean any system by which we seek to inherit eternal life by our own good works. For this lawyer, it was Judaism. For us, it may be what we call Christianity. The reason why it fails is that the standard is too high. We're sinners who ultimately can't live up to God's law, and deep down we know that. And so what we do is look for loopholes. And religion affords all kinds of loopholes. It allows us to focus on minute details rather than the law of love. These are much easier to keep; they're quantifiable, measurable, and manageable. It's more difficult to keep the law of love, with its limitless possibilities, than it is to stay away from dead bodies. It's much more difficult to obey the law of love than it is to attend church every Sunday. Not only does religion afford us loopholes but it also allows us to separate members of the human family into the righteous and the unrighteous, the "us" and the "them," the Jews and the Samaritans. And these distinctions, if we are not careful, can give us a holy looking rationale for NOT caring.

So if religion fails, what are we left with as a way to inherit eternal life? The answer to that question is hidden beneath the surface of the story. Salvation comes to us the same way it came to the injured man –

through an act of unexpected and costly love. Down through the ages, the church has always identified the Good Samaritan in this story with Jesus. He's the one who rescues us. We were helpless on the side of the road. Scripture says, "*we were dead in our transgressions and sins.*" Jesus, like the Samaritan, appeared on the scene as the unexpected hero to rescue us. In a costly demonstration of love, he gave his life for us. He poured out his blood on the cross to cleanse us; he anointed us with the oil of the Holy Spirit, and he purchased for us a place in the Father's care. We did nothing; he did everything.

What can we do to inherit eternal life? Jesus' answer is "Nothing at all!" Just recognize your own helplessness and cry out in need to him who alone can rescue you. Some of you are here wounded and life has left you beaten down. Cry out to the Good Samaritan!

The story also makes a statement about discipleship; about the kind of love Christ calls us to demonstrate for others. Remember that Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem. He's teaching people what it means to follow him as a disciple. Here he says that true discipleship means proving to be a neighbor to those we meet on the road who are in need and whose need we can meet. It has nothing to do with asking the question, who is my neighbor, with trying to figure out the limits of our responsibilities to others. If we interviewed the man lying on the road half-dead, who would he say his neighbor was? The Samaritan shows us that your neighbor may be unknown. I'm sure he had never met this Jew before. Your neighbor may be part of a group you have some issues with. You're conservative; she's liberal. You're white; he's not. Your neighbor may be unlovely. There's nothing attractive about a man lying in blood on a dirt road. Your neighbor may be unrewarding. I doubt the Jew ever paid the Samaritan back. I doubt the Samaritan went back to his village and got named the humanitarian of the year. Let's face it – often we help people because of how they can help us. But Jesus says your neighbor is anyone you meet who is in need and whose need you can meet.

This doesn't mean that we can do everything for everybody in every place. The Samaritan in our story isn't trying to save the world, he's just willing to help one man who he met on the road. We can't be everywhere, and where we are is important. I'm not in Calcutta, I'm in Foster City. Nor does the Samaritan do everything a person could possibly do. He doesn't take the man to his house and provide semi-permanent care. He doesn't obligate himself financially for the rest of his life. He doesn't set up a

rescue mission. He does what he can do. We can't meet every need we see, but we can do something.

We should ask ourselves a few questions, "*Am I interruptible?*" One of the things that keeps us from being a neighbor to others is that we're so busy, we're always headed someplace, and all of our activities are so urgent. I'm sure that's how the priest and the Levite felt. This is the one I struggle with the most. Early in the morning I make out my list of things to do and one of the great joys of my life is just checking those off as I go through the day. But, with a mentality like that how can I stay open to the surprise needs that God places before me?

We must also ask the question, *do I care; am I compassionate?* Are my responses governed by religious scruples or gut level compassion? Some of us are good at religion. We know what to do to make ourselves feel right with God, but we never get moved in our gut. Why is that? Because we have learned not to look. We're good at passing by on the other side. We know that if we look long enough to allow our eyes to meet the eyes of that person in need, then compassion will grab hold of us, and that could be dangerous. Every day I drive on 101 past East Palo Alto. Our city planners have made sure that I don't have to see East Palo Alto. They've built a big wall up and arranged the streets so we never have to pass through there and see. Because if we see our gut might just move us to do something.

Finally, we must ask the question, "*Am I willing to risk, to sacrifice, to pay the price to help my neighbor?*" Helping can be both risky and costly. On any given day, it may cost either our time, our money, our schedules, our peace of mind, perhaps our health. We can't do everything for everybody; but we can be willing to give what we can to somebody. We can spend the night at the hospital with someone who is alone and ill. We can buy a meal for a hungry man we meet on the side of the road. We can stop and help that woman whose car broke down get to a gas station. We can provide a room for that unwed mother who's chosen to keep her baby. There's a lot we can do if we're willing to keep our eyes open, allow our gut to be touched, and take a risk.

Every day of our lives you and I are on the road somewhere between Jerusalem and Jericho. The question is, will we, like the Samaritan, prove to be a neighbor to those we meet on that road who are in need whose need we can meet? Jesus leaves us with the same gentle exhortation he gave to the lawyer, "*Go and do likewise.*"

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