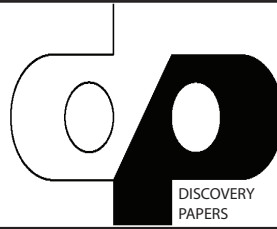


# WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR?

SERIES: INVITED: STORIES OF  
WELCOME IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE.



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Luke 10:25-37  
6th Message  
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*Luke 10:25-37*

When I was about 6 or 7, I fell into the habit of lying for the heck of it. I guess fibbing was a creative art form or something. My mother wanted to break me of the habit and she would say things like, “Honesty is the best policy.” Finally she resorted to telling a story. She told one of Aesop’s Fables, the story about the boy who cried wolf.

The story unfolds that there was a boy in a small village who was given responsibility to shepherd the sheep of the village. Each day the boy was sent off to a hillside far away to watch the sheep, and he got bored. One day he decided to stir things up and he sounded the alarm and cried “Wolf!” The townspeople all came running, huffing and puffing, and dropping all of their other stuff to show up. The boy thought that it was great fun to watch the people and all their consternation and harrumphing. Then, the people went back to their places.

Sometime later the boy got bored again, so he cried “Wolf!” and the townspeople came running. He got the same enjoyment from breaking up the boredom of his regular routine. But one day a wolf came and the boy cried “Wolf!” but the townspeople did not show up; no one came.

I looked up some published versions of this story online. The end of the story relays that the boy was frightened and humiliated, and that he asked the townspeople to forgive him for his lies. When my mom told the story, the wolf ate the kid.

My mom was a dramatic storyteller. “Honesty is the best policy or else!” Stories are like that—the parts we remember best are usually tied to something that is a sort of dramatic acting out. Sometimes what we are learning sticks to our minds and attaches itself to our imaginations because it is in story form.

We have come to the two best known, and I think the two greatest of Jesus’ parables this week and next in the Gospel of Luke. Today we will be considering the Good Samaritan and next week, the Prodigal Son.

It turns out that Luke is the only source for both of these stories. He is the only one who recorded both the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son parables. Both stories are consistent with what we have seen as his emphasis. Remember, Luke is forever trying to break down barriers and include the excluded, see the unseen, and put the outsiders in a good light. That is his bent as a chronicler of Jesus. So we should not be surprised for him to include these stories. Instead, we can be grateful because we would not have them otherwise.

Verse 25 of Chapter 10 is an introduction that we will read and consider, then we will turn to the parable itself.

**Luke 10:25-29:**

**And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” 26 He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” 27 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.” 28 And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”**

**29 But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”**

I have said that I am trying to restore the process of telling corny jokes in sermons at PBC....a long-standing habit we have. I thought the phrase, “Behold, a lawyer” would lead to some kind of joke. But I couldn’t find any lawyer jokes. It turns out that our society holds the legal profession in such high regard that there’s no satire about lawyers that I can find. I’ll do my best for next week.

In any case, we are told to behold or look at this person. He is a lawyer, not in the sense that he goes to trial or writes contracts or is Perry Mason or anything like that. It means that he is a Biblical scholar, effectively. That the law of Moses is a field that he has taken up. I am convinced that this is a young guy, although the text doesn’t say that, and there is some debate among commentators. When the text says that he intended to test Jesus, is he a hardened opponent

of Jesus who is trying to eventually get him in trouble, get him convicted, get him crucified? I don't read it that way. I think he is a young guy who is full of himself as many young men are, as I recall and I have observed. He thinks he knows more than his teacher, and he's going to test the teacher. He falls back fairly quickly to insecurity, because that often goes with being young as well, and he wants later to justify himself.

So we find this person who is going to take on Jesus and see what happens. And the way the Lord responds is to go with it. Jesus takes him seriously and answers the query. Then, we end up with a spontaneous seminar on the Law of Moses.

The question the man asks is a critical one. "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" It is a question that ought to require an answer from our hearts, from our convictions. But this is also a scholar's question. It is a Biblical rabbinical discussion topic. A question like that would be asked and it would lead to a discussion on the law. So Jesus decides to play along with that way of reading the text, at first. He asks, "How do you read it?" And the man answers love God with everything that is true of you, love your neighbor as yourself.

Let's look at statements in verse 28 before we move on from this introduction. The first is the Lord's statement, "You have answered correctly." There is a correct answer to the question: where does life come from? What were we made for? What does it mean to be human? What has our creator intended for us? Where is the place that leads away from darkness and toward the light? Can we know anything about what is good and true and worthwhile? And the answer is yes, there is a correct answer to the inquiry.

It's in fact the same answer that Jesus gave when legal scholars asked him on another occasion, "What are the most important commandments?" Jesus gave the very same answer. But consider what a gift is it to us to have been given the Scriptures, and see the effort our Lord went through to make clear to us who he is, where we are, where history is going, and what our lives were made for.

Every generation thinks the world is darkest around it. Surely you could sure make a good argument for the current day being especially dark. It is good that the Scriptures teach us a path to the life. We live in a culture that embraces foolishness. For many of our contemporaries, spirituality is understood as a bath of warm emotions and morality is a set of conclusions drawn from the premise that my short term happiness is the highest good. Lies and manipulation are a growth industry. We are inundated with overwrought sales pitches that are followed by dire threats,

and the message machine cannot be turned off. Where will we find life? Where will we turn for life? You and I have been made for something better than all of the chaos that is sold everywhere to us. Our holy Creator has designed us to love him with everything we have. He designed us, our hearts, soul, mind, and strength, and we are designed to love our neighbors. We love because we have first been loved.

Neighbors are not competitors to be feared or enemies to be vanquished. In fact, my neighbor offers me a practical opportunity to get past my preoccupation with myself; to bless others who bear the image of God. Love your neighbor as yourself. I realize now that I have lived long enough to have seen one or two generations, and outcomes—what happens when you live life. The people I admire most in the world, the ones who have lived the most gathered and resilient and courageous lives, are the ones who have loved the Word of God all their life. They have taken time to read the Word, to wrestle with it, to question it, to believe it, to pass it on to other people. There is a great strengthening that comes from being familiar with what God would say if we give him a chance to say it. Human purpose that is beautiful and durable. Jesus' questions can resonate beyond where we find it. How does his Word read to you? How does scripture read to you? We don't want our answer to be that we don't read it: "Gosh, I don't know." The gift is available to us, and do we read it? I think it's worth knowing that there is a correct answer and it is a great gift to us.

But it is not enough. The second half of Verse 28 Jesus commends the man's answer and he instructs him, "do this and you will live." *Do this* becomes the sticking point. Love is the main verb. Love for God and love for neighbor. And love is dangerous, uncontainable. Love takes us places we are not capable of going on our own. The "do this" requirement, not just "know this," but "do this" requirement of engaging in truth means that we will find ourselves incapable, broken, and failed. It is a gift to know that the lies of the fleshly and worldly environment we live in can be answered with truth. It is an enormous gift to know what's true. But when we are called to act, we can find our knees buckling a bit. We'll find the requirement is bigger than me. If I'm honest with myself, I don't love God with all of my heart. I treat him as an afterthought most of the time. I am jealous of my neighbor; I don't love my neighbor. All of my brokenness comes to the floor when I have to act on what's good.

That's why the man who is talking to Jesus desired to justify himself, and asked, "Who is my neighbor?" The point of his question is to set the bar as low as possible. Let's set loving God aside, because that's more than I can think about. But I am going to have to love my neighbor.

Let's limit the number of people in that circle. It's not everybody. I don't even want it to be a lot of folks. I want it to be as few as possible and with the responsibilities as narrow as possible so I have some kind of chance. And of course Jesus tells a story that goes in the completely opposite direction. There are no limits to love. There are absolutely no limits to love. It's going to get worse in terms of our capability of doing what we are called to do. The man is hoping for more talk or more discussion, maybe quoting of famous Rabbi's or some more legal discussion. The question, "Who is my neighbor?" should lead to that. Instead, Jesus tells him a story.

Let me read an example of a legal scholar who attempted to limit love in his own observations. Ben Sirach lived about 180 BC and his writings were well known. Jesus likely would have known them. Sirach was a highly regarded, well-known teacher. He said:

**"Give to a devout man, do not go to the help of a sinner. Do good to a humble man, give nothing to a godless one. Refuse him bread, do not give him any, it might make him stronger than you are; then you would be repaid evil twice over for all the good you had done him. For the Most High himself detests sinners, and will repay the wicked with vengeance. Give to the good man, and do not go to the help of the sinner." (Sirach 12: 3-7)**

Who is your neighbor? According to Sirach it's the good man. God hates sinners. You don't want to help the bad guys because they might turn around and hurt you. There is a practicality to this line of thinking and we should find some way to exclude the people we don't want, especially those we don't like and or despise.

Tribalism runs deep with us. We find it easy to give a megaphone to prejudice and division. We want to find ways to limit people who can draw us toward them, because of all the difficulty that goes with us. The fewer responsibilities and the fewer people we are responsible for, the finding of error and unacceptability in other people, justice for the people I like, respect for some—all of these instincts run deep in us and we can't wish them away. And we find ourselves in the midst of this problem: who is my neighbor? Not too many, I hope.

Jesus tells a story to help us make the hard discovery that love is not limited.

**Luke 10:30:**

**Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.**

Now so far, this story would have been fairly intriguing to our young friend. It creates a scenario where there is real tension. There is no obvious answer. It is going to call for an interesting intellectual exercise. The story takes place in a familiar place, so the story is realistic. There is a road that descends from Jerusalem to Jericho. It was a dangerous road. The fact that there were robbers on this road was reasonable as that was known to be the case. Levites and Priests would have been in the temple serving. We can imagine them leaving, having served a holy God and being isolated from sin and being ritually pure. All of these concerns are in place and we can imagine them in that setting, and that is reasonable. Jesus paints the wounded man in a particularly intriguing way.

We know nothing of his back story; we don't know where he was going, why he was going there, or who he was. He was both stripped and unconscious, meaning his clothing cannot give us a clue to what sort of person he was. Was he rich? Was he poor? Was he a Gentile or a Jew? Was he a sinner? Maybe he was one of the robbers who tried to double cross his friends and they beat him up. We don't know how he got here. We don't know anything about him. Maybe he deserves everything he got. Maybe his beating is God's punishment on him and I should go along with it. I don't know. How will I know?, We don't have any markings.

The man's voice can't speak—he can't talk about himself nor can his accent give him away. It's a real problem, and you can imagine the lawyer thinking about which should prevail: ritual purity or compassion. If the man dies, then we have a dead body and we're not supposed to touch dead bodies. If he's a sinner, we don't want to help sinners, but we don't know. This is a very intriguing problem. Jesus, this is kind of interesting. Where are you going with this?

Instead of wondering about whether the priest and/ or Levite should have stopped, Jesus blows up the whole thing by telling the rest of the story.

**Luke 10:33-37:**

**But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. 34 He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ 36 Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?’ 37 He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’**

The young man can't bring himself to say "the Samaritan," and we'll see in a minute that this is a completely staggering thought. But we do see that this is correct.

He said, "The one who showed him mercy. And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."

There is judgement to be rendered. You have to make a decision who is the right person in this story. And then there is this awful conclusion: you have to go and do the same thing. There is an action step required, and anyone with any sensitivity is going to realize that they can't—not at this level—like this extraordinary response.

Let's go back for a moment and look at the fact that the man who showed mercy is a Samaritan. This would have made the story completely over the top. Righteous Jews had no use at all for Samaritans. Samaritans were completely in the category of unrighteous sinners; they were wrongheaded, they believed the wrong stuff, they stood for the wrong stuff, and they were contemptuous. Samaritans weren't just ordinary outsiders—they carried around a special contempt with them. They were bumpkins. They were odious. They were looked down on. To put a Samaritan in the place of the star of the story is shocking.

I was trying to think of an analogy for this story. It would sort of be like telling a story at the Faculty Club where the hero is a Hells Angel who's shaved-headed, has tattoos and piercings, and he is more admirable, beautiful, and righteous than anyone else in the Faculty Club. Or the Symphonic Society meets and the light shines brightest on the harmonica player in a 10-gallon hat. These are people who don't belong, who don't rise to the level, but they are the ones who act and live in ways that please God.

In addition to the hero being the wrong person, his actions surpass the payout. The text says that when the Samaritan saw the man he had compassion. He didn't think his way up to compassion. He was moved to compassion when he first saw the man. And he puts his own life at risk; we don't know if the robbers are gone. It's not clear that stopping to help won't get you the same treatment the wounded man got. The fullness, the extensiveness of the Samaritan's care covered every possible need. He is tender in his care. He reaches down with his hands, he pours on ointment, he pours on wine, he lifts up the man and places him on his own donkey. The Samaritan stops whatever else he was doing and takes the man to a place where he can be cared for. The Samaritan pays for the care; he will pay for whatever it costs. We are not being told of a nice guy here. We are being told of someone we have never met before. Nobody is like this, and for no good reason. The Samaritan is in Jewish territory, and likely knows that he would almost certainly be hated by the man if he were awake.

What are you doing Jesus? Why so extraordinary a story? What is it supposed to stir in us?

Now, I want to use two different ways of looking at this story to try to put ourselves here. One way is familiar, the other a little less. The most familiar way of reading this story is concluding that we cannot do it—that we are being called on to love in ways that are beyond our abilities. A familiar reading would say there are three passersby. The first two of them fail and the third one doesn't. The Samaritan is the third guy who comes by. We are supposed to look at our own hearts for prejudice, for exclusion, for people that we have learned by whatever means—our life experience or however we were taught—to look down upon who we would want nothing to do with. This man—the Samaritan—is breaking all of the rules of propriety, all of the rules of who is inside and who is outside.

What about you and me? Where are we failing in courage? In failing to care about people who are difficult and are distasteful? I think that it is an extremely valuable and worthwhile personal discovery. I am a prejudiced guy. I don't even know some of the prejudices I have. Would I be willing to let them be changed? I am weak and fearful. I don't take risks for other people that I might. I think that's one level at which this story is intended: to bring us to our knees, to cry out for help, to not get caught up in the division that comes so easily to the world around us.

But there is another way to enter the story, not as the third passersby but as the wounded man who is by the side of the road. He is us. This goes way back, again this is the least common thread, but there are commentaries going back to the earliest days of the faith. Some have said that this is a story of failed people, wounded people; about broken, hurting, and bleeding people who need a savior, who need someone to stop for them.

If we are the man who has been wounded, there is a completely different perspective on this story that might help us. The traveler was alone, stripped naked, in pain, near death, and no one would draw near to help him. There are people in this room, in this congregation, who are living with great pain, some of which is not known to anyone else. Physical pain. Emotional pain. Some here have been abandoned by people who ought to have loved them. Some people live with relentless depression. Some can see the end of their life—the last grains of the hour glass are going through from top to bottom. I don't have much left and I don't know what to do with the last days of my life. I am afraid to die. All of us struggle to admit what we are afraid of. If we acknowledge the stuff that is not right, the stuff that is failed, the stuff that is painful about us—Would anyone stop for us? Would anybody come, if we were bleeding and unconscious by the side of the road? There is an old spiritual I like to quote because I believe it is true: "Nobody knows the trouble I have seen, nobody knows my sorrows, nobody knows but Jesus."

By taking an outcast and making him the saving stopperby, the one who comes and meets the need of the wounded person—he is pointing to himself. Jesus was an outcast, he was rejected, he had great cost on his life, he spent everything to stop and care for the person who was hurting.

I am going to ask you to use your imagination. I want to ask you to be as honest as you can with the things you are afraid of. The things about yourself that maybe only you know, the stuff that hurts. Put yourself by the side of the road with as much honesty as you can. Let's review what the Samaritan did for the wounded man.

"He saw him" it says, first of all. He saw him and immediately felt compassion. Can you believe of Jesus that he sees you? That you matter to him? That he's not somewhere else, that he sees you as you are, and feels compassion and nothing but compassion for you? Not judgement, not rejection, but only compassion. He stopped

and ministered to the wounds, stopped the bleeding, the ongoing loss of life. He put ointment on him, bandaged him, and touched him with his hands that had scars on them. And he held him and embraced him and lifted him and placed him on an animal that could take him to safety. He put him—the wounded person—and each of us as a wounded person, in a place of safety so someone could care for us and provide everything that could be needed. So that whatever may come up in the future, we would never need to go back to that place where no one cares and life is ending.

Do we believe that about Jesus? Do we have that kind of imagination? Have we let him love us that way?

I want to close by mentioning my father. I mentioned my mom in the first part of this sermon. I had a conversation with one of my sisters. Two of them live near my 95-year-old father who lives in San Diego, and they are around him often. I sometimes electronically, and as often as possible try to go visit him. He's 95 and everything is shutting down. He has less strength and he walks very little anymore. My sister told me that his eyesite is failing fast, although he is not quite blind. My dad stopped talking. Not literally—he just doesn't have anything left to say anymore. He just wants other people to talk because he doesn't know what to say, and his mind isn't working very well, and he forgets things. The thing I have the most trouble with is that the day is coming when all of those things get taken away.

The command is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. What if your mind and your strength and what you have left to love is gone? I don't have anything left. I don't have any cards left to play. The call is for me to respond, but there's not much left for me to respond, and that day is coming for all of us. The thing that will matter then is not what we can do in terms of love, but have we let Jesus love us? Have we learned, by the Spirit of God, to welcome his embrace? To acknowledge that we are bleeding and hurting? Will we let him draw near to us when we don't have anywhere else to go? When we don't have much to do? Have we learned repeatedly in our imaginations and in our understanding to let him love us? There is a line from an old country song, "Desperado": "Will you let anyone love you before it is too late?"

I think this story can be a reminder to us that the wisest thing we can do is to be loved. Out of that flows all other response or non-responses that we would hope to be true of us.