

SERMON: Who is My Neighbor?

TEXT: Luke 10:25-37

I heard a news story recently – well, it’s more like I overheard the story. I wasn’t listening closely, so I didn’t get all the details. But a woman had donated her kidney to – I think – a complete stranger. We would all agree that such a selfless act demonstrates an extraordinary level of compassion. Then the story turned to science and the fact that there’s a region in the brain that controls our feelings of empathy. Apparently, and it is more active in some people than in others.

With this knowledge, there are some people who would be tempted to use this as justification for their own lack of empathy. “Well, I guess I was just made that way. Can’t help that.”

However, it is also true that we can be taught. An article in *Psychology Today* pointed out that our brains can be rewired and, with practice, we can increase our capacity to feel empathy and compassion. Mindfulness training and volunteerism are a couple ways to do this. (Christopher Berglund, *The Neuroscience of Empathy; Neuroscientists identify specific brain areas linked to compassion.* [www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com) October 10, 2013)

Well, we all know the story of the Good Samaritan inside and out. We all know that we're supposed to help when we see a person in need. There's even a law that requires you to help in some instances. The Good Samaritan Law. So, you may be wondering why we really need to hear this sermon *yet again*.

But I noticed something this time reading through the parable that I haven't noticed before.

First, put yourself in the place of this lawyer. He meets Jesus and asks how to get to heaven. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus, of course, answers his question with a question. "What is written in the law?" Well, this *lawyer* is an expert in Mosaic Law, a scholar of the scriptures, so the answer is easy. Many of you who are lifelong Christians could recite it without hesitation, just as he does: "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." Jesus replies, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

Now, here it is. "But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'and who is my neighbor?'" Wanting. To. Justify. Himself.

This lawyer – like us – wants to set some boundaries and add some conditions. He wants to find a loophole. He wants to make it okay if he helps this person but not that one. Or if he can choose the time and the place. Perhaps he wants to claim that his brain just isn't wired that way. Changing his behavior was too hard. So, he wanted to justify himself.

We are all experts at justifying ourselves, aren't we? I am especially good at this when it comes to food. "I had a small lunch, so it's okay if I have an extra large piece of cake after supper." Or, there's that old adage used when someone asks for a donation to charity: "I gave at the office" or "I've done my good deed for the day." My mom had a pet peeve about saying, "I can't afford it." Often that statement is more about priorities than about how much money you have. And the one that begins almost as soon as we learn to talk: "He started it."

We all make excuses by inventing good reasons for bad behavior.

The lawyer questioning Jesus was looking for some good reasons to not show love to *all* his neighbors.

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR? He asked Jesus. And then Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan.

Another discovery I made recently is that we have always looked at this from the perspective of the person passing by, the person who has to decide whether to help or ignore the injured man. And I think it might be helpful to put ourselves in the place of the injured man.

It is you that has been robbed, brutally beaten, and left for dead in a ditch beside the road. It is you that needs help. A person from your church sees you there, but hurries past, afraid that evil still lurks nearby. Then it's an old friend, a person you've known since childhood, and who's known as a model citizen around town. That one pretends he doesn't see anything and casually crosses to the other side of the road.

There are plenty of justifications they might make for not helping: It was a dark, lonely, dangerous road where they might become victims, too. They thought you were dead, and they couldn't risk becoming ritually unclean. They had no expertise; they panicked; they simply didn't know what to do.

Then, along comes someone you don't recognize. Not of your race, and clearly not from your neighborhood. A foreigner in many respects. Middle Eastern. Perhaps a Muslim. Or Hispanic. From Honduras or Guatemala. A young person who looks like a boy, but is wearing makeup like a girl. Maybe just someone with his pants hanging down to his knees, from the South side of town. That person stops and begins to speak gently to you. He gives you some water to drink. She asks you where it hurts. He takes off his t-shirt to wrap up your wounds. She calls an ambulance and stays with you until you're in the hands of professionals.

Someone whom you least expected has been a loving neighbor and has shown mercy to you. In the parable, it is a Samaritan who shows mercy to a Jew. The Samaritan is literally a foreigner on that road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The Jews hated the Samaritans, and vice versa. They were enemies.

One theologian pointed out that when Jesus asked the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man?" the lawyer answered only, "the one who showed mercy." She wrote, "Do you notice that the lawyer does not say, *the Samaritan*? It is as if he can't bear to voice the obvious answer. He seems to want to dodge the implications, the upending, distasteful, shocking, obvious

answer that it is the hated other, the Samaritan, who is truly the neighbor...” (Jill Duffield, *Looking into the Lectionary; God’s plumb line*, [www.thepresbyterianoutlook.com](http://www.thepresbyterianoutlook.com), July 8, 2019)

Another commentary shared a story about a 12-year-old Palestinian boy who had been shot by Israeli soldiers during street fighting near his home in the West Bank. The boy had been holding a toy gun. He was taken to an Israeli hospital, where he died after two days. His parents made the decision to allow his organs to be harvested to transplant to Israelis. Six people received organs from him, including his heart, lungs, and kidneys. His mother said, “My son has died. Maybe he can give life to others.” (James A. Wallace, C.S.S.R., *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, 2010)

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR? It is a question that looms quietly but relentlessly in the background of the news. Every day. On some level. In our country. And we must stop pretending that the words of Jesus don’t apply. We must stop pretending that what we proclaim on Sunday is not relevant every other day of the week. We need to stop justifying our actions. We need to stop making excuses for our inaction. We need to stop putting boundaries on the definition of neighbor. We need to stop placing limits on who deserves our love. No matter what you believe about immigration, and whether crossing our border is a criminal

act, even criminals deserve better treatment than that which these desperate men, women, and children are experiencing in American detention centers.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus taught us that a neighbor is one who shows mercy – even to a hated enemy. And Jesus then ended the lesson with these words, “Go and do likewise.”

To the glory of God!

AMEN.