

Ben Lattimer
Sunday Service, Sermon
October 1, 2023
On Luke 10
Like a Good Neighbor

Sermon

Intro Story

I had just finished my sophomore year of college. Now, the term *sophomore* comes from putting together two Greek words – *Sophos* meaning “wise”... and *Moros* from which we get the word “moron.” I was very much a *sophomore* at that point in my life - a “*wise fool*”. I had learned so much – but not quite enough yet to realize how little I actually knew. My mom was much wiser.

I grew up in a parsonage. We lived right next door to the church. My dad was the pastor. The doorbell often rang. We never knew who was going to be there. The state psychiatric institution was only a few blocks away. We often had strange visitors. And of course people regularly came asking for help.

I was home from college for the summer, after my *sophomore* year, when the doorbell rang. There was a man on the steps that I had never seen. My parents were out. It was just me. I could handle this. I was a sophomore!

He wanted money – for food, he said. I started to ask him questions. I could smell someone trying to take advantage of me... He had alcohol on his breath. I called him on it - asked him where he got the money for that. “From my friends,” he said. “They helped you get something to drink, why don't you ask them for something to eat? How do I know you're not going to use the money to buy more alcohol instead of food?” He started to get upset. “Look, if you're not going to help me,” he said...

Then my mom pulled up. She saw a man on our porch. A man asking for help because he was hungry. No interrogation. No grilling. She invited him in and made him a sandwich. He wolfed it down. She made him another one. He wolfed it down again. She made him more for the road. He said, “Thank you.” She thanked him for coming and said good-bye.

Thank God for my mother. I was such a fool...

Back to the Story

“Who is my neighbor?” That’s the question the lawyer asks. Well it’s not the *first* question he asks.

This legal expert comes to Jesus and asks him the big question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

He recognizes Jesus as a great teacher and wants to pick his brain - get some of his wisdom and insight. “Teacher! What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

And in classic Socratic fashion, Jesus turns the question around on him. "You're the legal expert. What's in the law? What do you find there?"

And the lawyer answers: "Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself." "Gold star. A+, Jesus says. You got it. See - you didn't even need me. You *knew* the right answer. Now *DO* this - and you will live."

Well - when he puts it like that it all seems too obvious. So, being a good lawyer, he digs in on the definitions... "OK - I know I'm supposed to 'love my neighbor as myself...' But *who is my neighbor?*" There's the rub. It's a good question - a question we all ask - whether we realize it or not. *Who is my neighbor?* Who is the person I'm responsible for - the person I'm supposed to care for.

And so Jesus tells this parable. You know it well. The Priest and the Levite pass on by - by the Samaritan - the outcast, the "half-breed" pagan... The Samaritan sees and stops. The Samaritan helps.

And that's when Jesus flips it all around. The lawyer had asked - *Who is my neighbor?* Who am I responsible to help. But now at the end of the story, Jesus asks a question of his own: Who *was* a neighbor - to the man in the ditch, the man who had been beset by robbers?

Martin Luther King noted that "the Samaritan neighbor has flipped the implicit question asked by the passersby (what will happen to me if I help?) and *acts* on the question 'what will happen to the wounded stranger if I don't help?'"

The lawyer's question - our question - asks "Who do I have a responsibility to help?" Jesus answers by flipping the perspective. The question of *neighbor* is answered from the perspective of the ditch. Who *WAS* a good neighbor?

"The one who showed mercy."

Then, Jesus says, go and *DO likewise*...

There's that verb again. *DO*. When the lawyer first shared what he found written in the law, Jesus had said, "You have answered rightly... *DO* this and you shall live."

Now here at the end of the story, the lawyer - like us - again knows the right answer. And again, Jesus invites him beyond knowing into action.

Go and *DO likewise*...

Am I a good neighbor?

21st Century Faith

What the Samaritan does is beautiful - and brave. Who knows? The robbers may be lurking around the bend, waiting for another victim. Getting involved is always messy. But the Samaritan sees - and has compassion. He shows mercy. Go and do likewise.

But here's the thing: who are we supposed to help?

Here in this 21st Century world we live in, there's not just *one* person, lying in the ditch... Thanks to the wonders of the internet and TV - we know about flooding in Libya and earthquakes in Morocco. Wildfires in Hawaii and flooding in New York. Wars in Ukraine and Sudan. Violence in Nigeria - and in our own nation. Immigrants on the border - desperately seeking a safe place for themselves and their children. Racial injustice, mass incarceration, food insecurity.

I find myself asking all over again? Who is my neighbor? Which one, Lord! It's too much. I can't help them all.

So I often find myself walking by - like the Priest and the Levite. Trying hard not to notice, because I'm not sure what I'd do about it if I did. The Samaritan had compassion, but sometimes I have compassion *fatigue*. My heart can't take it all...

It's overwhelming. And if you're like me - it's paralyzing. *It's... Too... BIG.*

Mary Hinkle puts it like this: "Sometimes ...our political reflections on how hopeless it is to try to change the system, function as a sophisticated parlor game to keep us occupied while we are avoiding actually doing anything for anyone."

Think Small

So maybe the answer is to think small. Not to let the BIG-ness of the world's problems paralyze us into doing nothing.

The Samaritan didn't fix the whole system by himself. He didn't swoop in like Super-man and bring the robbers to justice. He didn't end all highway robbery. He did what he could for this one person in front of him.

I was talking with Pam about this after a recent Witness Team meeting. What do we do - when the problems are so big and so many? She quoted Adrienne - who works in Campus Ministry across the street - she said, "You do *something*... Maybe you don't solve all the problems - but you do *something* - you help *someone*..."

You find compassion in your heart and you show mercy. *You give them a sandwich...*

And then you trust - that we are not alone...

We are Not Alone

The work is not *ours* alone. These are God's children - and God is at work caring for God's children, even when it's hard to see - in us, through us, *and beyond us*.

We are not alone. We are not asked to carry it all on our shoulders. We have each other - the body of Christ in this church family and beyond. Faithful people of good-will - surprising Samaritans everywhere... There are a lot of good people in the world who don't generally show up in the news...

So let us do something. For someone.

And who knows where it leads?

When Jeremy baked a few batches of cookies for caregivers on the front lines at the beginning of the Pandemic - who could have imagined how it would turn out? An army of bakers - making and sharing thousands upon thousands of cookies - these tangible reminders of love... As Jeremy's dad said it, "a little good goes a long way..."

Visits with inmates - relationships formed with folks like Tyree Wallace - that go on to transform lives and communities. Deliver meals on wheels - or take meals around on

A card or a phone call to someone who's hurting. Some soup for a neighbor maybe...

Think small. A little good goes a long way...