

**Sermon July 10, 2022**  
**Michelle Mehan, ELCA Deacon**  
**How am I a neighbor?**

May the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you o Lord my strength and my redeemer.

In our scripture readings the past few weeks we have seen Jesus call us to act and serve. He said come and serve me now, drop everything. And he said go out in pairs, don't take anything, stay where you are welcome. If you are not welcome, move on, shake the dust off your sandals and go.

Now today we heard once again the parable of the Good Samaritan. Another familiar story.

What do these scriptures mean to us today?

How many times have we thought about the meaning?

How many times have we thought about the different people in the story?

Everyone is our neighbor. It is our response to the neighbor that shows who we really are.

Every theologian has their take on this passage. From Martin Luther to Howard Thurman, Barbara Brown Taylor, Walter Breuggeman and Fred Rogers. Each one of them and many more had a lot to say about who is our neighbor. There are no shortage of words. The shortage is in understanding and application.

First let's look at how this parable is set up. A lawyer asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asks, "What is written in the law?" 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."

Sounds like a conversation between a parent and child..... A question answered with a question.

Then the lawyer asks for clarification..... One more question. Who is my neighbor?

Who is my neighbor? Why do you think the lawyer asked this question? The gospel says the lawyer wanted to justify himself. This time Jesus responds with the all too familiar parable (story) of The Good Samaritan.

Let's review:

A man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho

He was robbed and beaten and left for dead

A priest was going down the road and when he saw him, he passed by the other side.

A Levite saw the man and also passed on the other side.

Now a Samaritan came upon him and was moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds. Treated him with oil and wine. Took him with his animal and brought him to an inn to have him cared for. He left him and said when I return I will repay you any extra that is needed.

Jesus asks the lawyer who was the neighbor? The lawyer responds the Samaritan.

Jesus says: Go and do likewise.

How do you feel after hearing that? I often have more questions.

One thing about this is that the Samaritans were not regarded as good people. They were “those” people. They were not accepted or respected. So it is ironic that this parable is called The Good Samaritan since when this story was told Samaritans were not considered good according to society.

As an outsider looking into the story it makes me sad, confused and hurt to see the priest not only walk by but cross the street to get away from the hurt man.

Then a Levite does the same thing.

Then along comes the Samaritan. The most unlikely of people we expect to stop and help.

Why did the priest and Levite not stop and help? We do not know. We can make up answers, too busy, too preoccupied, repulsed by the man, did not “see” the person, someone else’s job?

We can only guess.

Then along comes the Samaritan. The “Other”, the outcast, the one that did not fit in. The one who was not recognized as being acceptable. Yet he is the one who stopped. He not only stopped he tended with care and compassion. He went above and beyond what either of the other two did.

WHAT DOES THE STORY gain when the Samaritan is the helper? For starters, the point about accepting love from unlikely, uninvited sources is hammered home: We must be willing to accept help and mercy from those we'd least like to have minister to us. Although that point could have been made if the Samaritan had been the victim (I doubt he'd really want to be saved by a Jewish lawyer given the choice), it is more emphatic and memorable because Jesus

asks the lawyer to imagine someone who might be the lawyer himself in need and suffering. Because the lawyer first empathizes with the one who's robbed, it's more obvious to him that the unlikely, despised candidate acts as a neighbor--that our neighbor is the one who is kind to us, regardless of ethnicity, religion, politics, or past personal history.

As Walter Brueggemann writes, "this may be much more difficult than finding the inner strength and grace to stop and give aid and comfort to our enemy. To comprehend our utter inability to help ourselves, swallow our pride, and permit those we dislike or detest to save us is to come to the point of calling them friends. It is the crossing of an enormous barrier on this each, certainly one of the most unspannable for human nature." Jesus reveals this tough lesson by first having the lawyer empathize with the one in need.

Empathy--this ability to imagine, feel, and identify with the pain of another--is key to the Good Samaritan story. Empathy is likely what inclined the Samaritan to stop. He would have known what it was like to be ignored, to be hated as a mixed-race person. He knew that if he were mugged, no one would stop. He could identify with the victim. In this way the story is more true as Jesus tells it--it might have been simply inconceivable that a Jewish lawyer would have stopped for a mugged Samaritan.

Brene Brown, a well know author on connection, community and relationships has this talk about sympathy and empathy.

Empathy drives connection. Sympathy drives disconnection.

Can you relate to this story in anyway? Have you stopped to help someone? Have you been asked for help by someone and passed them by? Looked right through them like they don't exist?

Jesus wants us to be compassionate. In verse 33: But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion.

There will always be people who do not respond, help or show compassion. Jesus says that we are called to be compassionate.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Have you not been in the "in" crowd? Have you ever been marginalized?

That was the Samaritan. He was not accepted, he was marginalized, he was the outsider. When he came upon the man on the road needing help his heart went out to him. He connected to help him. He was filled with compassion. He knew what it was like to need help.

He let go of self. He did not think oh I have a meeting to get too, I'm too busy, someone else will tend to him. Not my job, not my people. No he saw he needed help and he helped.

Who would the players in this story be today? A wealthy person, A bishop or well known and respected community person? Who would be the Samaritan? A homeless person, An LGBTQ+ person, a person of a different skin color, a refugee?

I have been the other, I have been on the outside. I know what it is like to not be accepted. I know hurt pain and rejection, even by church people. I have been made to feel less than. I feel that it is why I try so hard to make connection. I feel deeply.

That is what we are called to do. When we live with compassion it comes as second nature. We see the person, see look into their eyes. We do not ignore or look through them. We connect with them. They are our neighbor!

It is about connection and community.

It is about finding what we have in common, humanity.

I say in my work as a chaplain no matter what people have these basic questions. Have I loved, have I been loved and have I made a difference.

It is certainly easy to make excuses, to get caught up in our own schedules, agendas or plans. Yet the example is clear. The message is straight forward. Serve and help when needed.

This lesson reminds me of The Golden Rule: In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and prophets. Matthew 7:12. The thing is every faith tradition has a tenant to the Golden Rule.....

Examples:

When I worked at a local ALF a fellow employee came in my office and asked if a poster in my office that showed the Golden Rule from the perspective of all faiths offended me. I said no, I hung that there and I believe it. We are all connected, we can all learn from each other and every faith has a tenant to the Golden Rule. I find it a connection point for all of us to learn and connect to. The person huffed, turned around and walked out of my office. It was their way or no way.

We do this not only with different faiths but different beliefs within our own denominations. The difference between ELCA, Missouri Synod and Wisconsin Synods. Did you know that ELCA

Lutherans are not welcome to receive communion at a Missouri Synod church. Women are not ordained or allowed to hold leadership positions in Missouri Synod or Wels churches.

We keep learning to do better, we keep learning to be a light of welcome and openness to all. Not long ago Same sex marriage was not permitted in the country and many churches. I am thankful that 7 years ago Kim and I were able to get married here. We met at church. It would have been heartbreaking to be rejected by our church. We are not less than.

There have been times when I will go into a patient's room and the TV will be on a certain news channel and the patient will go off with their commentary. It can be mean spirited and ugly. Unknowingly that person is saying very mean and ugly things about my personhood. I cannot argue. I swallow hard and ask for the grace and love to see this person as God does, God's beloved child and to love them as I love myself. I have a choice.

Each day we have a choices. In fact we are bombarded with choices. How to help, how to serve?

An internet mem has been circulating showing this note: Someone who was able to relate to the other left this.

Friend:

I've lived across from this public park for a few years now. It's not hard to recognize when someone is living from their vehicle, I've been there too. If there is anything you need, food, water, etc please feel free to knock at my door. I'm directly across from you at 2455. I'm a Christian, I ask nothing in return. I see you out there and I feel for you. Peace, Dan.

WOW! A modern day Good Samaritan.

Mr. Rogers, a presbyterian pastor whose TV show Mister Rogers Neighborhood was his parish tackled challenging subjects. Mr. Rogers was able to take very hard subjects like: Divorce, death of a pet, people with disabilities, civil rights, assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and many other topics. Mr. Rogers taught us the theology of being a neighbor. How to help, how to serve, how to welcome and how to be.

When I was an undergrad I moved into a brand new dorm and each section was called a neighborhood. How could be we a neighbor to each other? Living in a dorm really can expose one to new experiences, different people, customs and how others live. It is a time to learn and share.

I am thankful for the example of Mr. Rogers and for all of those in my life who have allowed me to grow in compassion to serve my neighbor and learn to love others as I love myself.

Martin Luther claims that it is our Christian vocation to love God and live in service to our neighbor. A Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and the neighbor. He lives in Christ through faith, and in his neighbor through love. Citizens are to love and serve their fellow citizens. They do so in the normal interactions of the various communities to which they are called, from their informal social activities to their political activism, continually pursuing the common good. Luther's doctrine of vocation with its radical, neighbor-centered ethic displaces good works from the realm of the merely spiritual into the realm of the material, the social, and the ordinary. God is hidden in vocation. Christ is hidden in our neighbors.

Valarie Kaur wrote a book, *See No Stranger, A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*. How do we live in a time of turmoil? How do we labor for the world we want when the labor feels endless? Valarie Kaur, renowned Sikh activist, filmmaker, and civil rights lawyer declares revolutionary love as the call of our time, a radical, joyful practice that extends in three directions; to others, to our opponents, and to ourselves. It enjoins us to see no stranger but instead look at others and say: You are part of me I do not yet know. Starting from that place of wonder, the world begins to change. It is a practice that can transform a relationship, a community, a culture, even a nation. When a critical mass of people come together to wonder about one another, grieve with one another, and fight with and for one another, we begin to build the solidarity needed for collective liberation and transformation. A solidarity rooted in love. Powerful words.....

So I ask How am I as a neighbor? How do I respond to the need of the other?

We often want the easy way, who is my neighbor because if you tell me it is this group I can check that box and get that task done.

There it is folks we often get so caught up in the logistics, the nuts and bolts of doing it right we get stuck in our heads and leave out our hearts. And here we are reminded over and over that it is about our hearts and how we respond in love to our neighbor. And our neighbor is everyone.

LOVE your neighbor: Who doesn't look like you.

Love your neighbor: Who doesn't think like you

Love your neighbor: Who doesn't love like you  
Love your neighbor: Who doesn't speak like you  
Love your neighbor: who doesn't pray like you  
Love your neighbor: who doesn't vote like you  
Love your neighbor..... NO Exceptions.

May it be so. AMEN