

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Neighbor: Wriggling Out”

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Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” 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 given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Luke 10:25-29

Last week we began this series “Neighbor: The Gospel’s Guide to Living Next Door.” Our hope for this series is to answer a lot of questions we heard back from you just about a year ago. Those questions were to the extent of, “How should we live out our faith in public?” Well, we’ll be looking at a sampling of what Scripture has to say on the matter, but what I hope we’ll find is that a lot of the answer could be summed up in an understanding of what it means to be a neighbor and to love one’s neighbor.

Last week, we read how a lawyer questioned Jesus on what the greatest commandment was, and in Jesus’ response, he cited two verses from the Old Testament, one of them from the Book of Leviticus, “to love your neighbor as yourself.” We then took a closer look at that same verse from the Book of Leviticus, finding that its own rationale to love one’s neighbor was based in who God is, in God’s character, in God’s love, in God’s grace and sovereignty, *not* in how loving we may be or in how lovable we might deem our neighbor to be.

And this week, we’ll hear some of the same words, but this time from the Gospel of Luke, at the beginning of what might be a familiar story. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

[Read passage.] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I heard this story about a Catholic priest in Philadelphia. I forget where I heard it, so it’s one of those where I’m not entirely sure whether it’s a true story or not, nor could I really say for sure it involved a Catholic priest, as opposed to some other clergyperson, or the city of Philadelphia in particular, but in any case...

A priest was leading worship in his parish in the city of Philadelphia in late January, right around this time of year in fact. It just so happened that the Philadelphia Eagles had a 1:00 kickoff in a playoff game that same day. The Scripture for the day happened to be this very passage, and not just these particular verses, but also the next eight verses through verse 37, encompassing all of what is known as the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Maybe you know this story already, maybe you’re not as familiar, but the gist of it is, a traveler’s going down the road and gets mugged, beaten up, and left for dead. A priest and a Levite both come upon him, only to pass by. But then a Samaritan—and the word “Samaritan” refers to someone from Samaria, which typically was not thought of favorably by the Jewish people—a Samaritan comes by, tends to the man, takes him to an inn, and makes sure he’s restored to health. Jesus then concludes the story by asking, “Which of these three, do you think,

was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The lawyer answers, “The one who showed him mercy,” to which Jesus responds, “Go and do likewise.” That’s the parable of the Good Samaritan.

So back to the Catholic priest in Philadelphia. He reads this passage to the church, but while he’s reading, he can notice folks starting to look down at their watches. (Y’all think we don’t notice that from up here, but we do. Actually you’re probably thinking, “Uh, Jay, of course we know you can notice. Why do you think we’re looking at our watches in the first place? It’s so you can notice us doing it. Get on with it.”) But he starts noticing people checking their watches and shuffling in their seats, presumably because it was getting closer and closer to kickoff for the Eagles’ playoff game.

The priest finishes reading the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Looks out at the church. Looks at the clock. And says to everyone, “Y’all,” actually he didn’t say y’all. It’s Philadelphia. “Yous guys,” I don’t know. “Everybody,” he says, “this isn’t complicated. You heard what Jesus said. Go and do likewise.” And after that, he promptly wraps up the worship service and takes off his robe revealing an Eagles jersey underneath, and everyone heads out, presumably to go watch the game.

So in honor of the priest’s confidence in the power of Scripture to speak for itself, we’re actually going to cut short today’s sermon, and instead leave it at “Go and do likewise.” Nah, I’m kidding. We’re gonna spend three weeks talking about it, going bit by bit through it.

But I bring up that story about the priest in Philadelphia because even as we take a deep dive over the next three weeks into this powerful parable, I never want us to lose sight of where the story ends up. Who was a neighbor to the man beaten up on the road? It isn’t complicated. Don’t overthink it. Go and do likewise.

Because unfortunately, there is a tendency to try to overthink this, to complicate it, to qualify it, to muddy the waters. The calling is unequivocal. “Go and do likewise.” But we want to dull the edges. I wonder why that is.

Fortunately for us, or maybe unfortunately for us, depending on how you look at it, we’re not alone, because Jesus is talking to someone with just the same instinct.

The lead-up to the parable is the short exchange we read a few minutes ago between a lawyer—and when you hear “lawyer” in this case, think more “trained scribe in Jewish religious law” and less “legal representative”—and Jesus. And really the parable itself is just a continuation of that exchange. But the lawyer asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Then Jesus flips the question back to him: what does the law say about it? The lawyer cites two verses from the Old Testament. “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,” which is from the Book of Deuteronomy, and then “your neighbor as yourself” which is from the Book of Leviticus.

It might sound familiar, because in fact, it’s the same two verses that we heard Jesus cite in one of the passages we read last week from the Gospel of Matthew. Except in Matthew, it’s Jesus citing them; while in Luke it’s the lawyer citing them, and Jesus just affirms the answer. In Matthew, it’s in response to the question, “What is the greatest commandment?” In Luke, it’s in response to the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” In Matthew, the exchange takes in Jesus’ final week in Jerusalem. In Luke, it’s a good bit earlier than that. Could be two very similar exchanges that Jesus had over the course of his ministry. Could be that Luke is telling the story a little bit differently—let’s talk more if you’re curious what we should make about what could appear to be differences between the four Gospels.

But the main thing is that in the way Luke tells it, after the lawyer cites this commandment to love your neighbor as yourself, one half of the summary of the law, one half of this formula to inherit eternal life, Jesus says, “Yeah, that’s correct. Love God. Love neighbor.” “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

If we were reading last week’s passage, that’s kind of where the discussion ends on that topic. That’s the greatest commandment. Love God; love neighbor. Everything else stems from that.

But here, in this back and forth between Jesus and the lawyer, the lawyer has just one more thing to throw in there. He asks, “And who is my neighbor?”

Imagine what this exchange would have looked like if he hadn’t said that last thing. Well, for one, we wouldn’t have gotten the powerful parable that Jesus goes into, because everything about the Good Samaritan is in response to the lawyer’s question. But if he hadn’t added, “And who is my neighbor?”, what would this whole thing sound like?

Well, at the very least, it’d be just another example of Jesus teaching through the law, even reinterpreting the law: “Do this, and you will live.” How much could we benefit just from that answer and challenge? That’s all we need to worry about: loving God and loving neighbor.

But the lawyer adds that little question, “And who is my neighbor?” And it brings up all sorts of other questions. Like, why did he feel the need to ask that in the first place? Sure maybe it was just a bit of academic or philosophical back and forth; that was common enough in those days.

But Luke tells us that it was because the lawyer wanted to “justify himself,” meaning, he wanted to vindicate himself as the one that was right in this exchange. And I wonder, just what exactly was he hoping to prove? Did he have an answer already in mind, and he was just itching to show just how right his way of thinking was? Did he already have a definition made out for himself of who his neighbor was, and now he wanted to prove it against this upstart Galilean teacher?

We can all fall guilty to this. Have you ever asked a question not because you wanted to hear someone else’s answer to it, but because you yourself wanted to offer your own answer to it once that other loudmouth stopped yammering? I sure have. I do it every Sunday, and y’all don’t talk back.

Or was it the other way around, was there an answer he was afraid of hearing, a definition of “neighbor” he didn’t want to hear, and so he asked, “Who is my neighbor?” just to see if he could still hold onto what he thought?

If that was the reason, I wonder who he had in mind. Was it that tax collector down the street from him, the one that always got on his nerves and swindled the whole community? But he didn’t live right next door to him, so if “neighbor” could just apply only to those who live immediately next to you, then he could go on hating him.

Or was it that other lawyer, that other scribe that he always butted heads with in the synagogue? Sure they both shared a similar worldview, but there were just a few small issues, a few points of disagreement, and it seemed whenever those came up, the two of them would always clash, and it wasn’t pretty, so if “neighbor” could just apply only to those who agreed with you, then he could go on clashing with him.

Or was it that Roman soldier, that foreigner who always patrolled the streets? He was that representation of someone other than he was, and more than that, someone who was actively subduing and oppressing him and his people, so if “neighbor” could just apply to only to those of the same nationality, then he could go on resenting him.

I wonder who he was thinking of that he was hoping to keep out of this category of “neighbor.” Because the stakes were high. Whoever was a “neighbor,” then by his own admission, the law said to love that person, and maybe there were any number of people he did not want to love. Maybe there were any number of people he was afraid to love. Maybe there were any number of people for whom he was looking for any reason *not* to love. So any reason he could latch onto to wriggle out from having to love them, he was going to take.

The lawyer isn’t alone, of course. Whether in word or in action or in thought, we’ve all got that tendency, maybe even an eagerness to ask “And who is my neighbor?” not because we genuinely curious, but because deep down there’s an answer that scares us, some one or some group of people who we’d be horrified to learn we should consider our neighbor and therefore someone we are called to love.

Who are you afraid of loving? Who are you looking for a reason not to love?

Is it that person down the street or in your building who’s always ruining the neighborhood, just always difficult and combative? It’d be a lot easier just to write him or her off, so if “neighbor” could just exclude those who aren’t pleasant, then you can go about your business.

Is it that coworker you see everyday, the one that’s always contradicting you in meetings, the one that seems to undermine you at every turn? It’d be a lot easier just to chalk it up to oil and water not mixing, so if “neighbor” could just exclude those you clash with in the workplace, then you can go about your business.

Or is it that outsider, that new person who moved into town from wherever it was they moved from, bringing those other values from the West Coast or Northeast or Midwest or Southwest or out-of-state or elsewhere-in-this-state or pretty-much-anywhere-but-here? It’d be a lot easier just to chalk it up to, “They’re not one of us,” so if “neighbor” could just exclude those who ain’t from around here, then you can go about your business.

Who are you afraid of loving? Who are you looking for a reason not to love? I know I’ve got some people in mind. Whoever that person or persons may be, know first that you’re not alone if maybe you try wriggle out from having to love that person. It’s a common enough instinct. Love those you like; love those who are like you; what’s more natural than that?

But what Jesus is about to teach defies even that most natural instinct, because it defies our tendency, our eagerness to look for a reason to write someone off. So perhaps as we continue to explore what Jesus is teaching about loving our neighbor, we first need to examine and admit just how quick we are to try to dull the edges to a call like “Love your neighbor as yourself,” to ask “Well, who is my neighbor?” Because it’s only from that place of recognizing how selfish, how exclusive, how selective we can be, only when our eyes are opened to just how crooked our own hearts can be toward one another, that our eyes can then be opened to the far better, uncommon, not-of-this-world love that leads to eternal life.

May your eyes be opened this day.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.