

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Neighbor: NIMBY”

Dr. Jay Howell

Luke 10:30-32

January 23, 2022

We continue our series “Neighbor” this morning, and a quick plug, reminder, and encouragement for everyone to put some thought into those Preaching Polls that we talked about earlier. If you needed any further evidence, it was your responses a year ago that shaped this very series we’re in right now, because many of those responses expressed questions or concerns about how we as a people of faith in Christ can live out that faith in a charged, divisive world. What you say back to us has a big influence when we put together a year’s worth of sermon series. It’s not the only thing we look at, but it’s a big part of it—and by the way if you ever want to know more about how that particular sausage gets made, I’d love to tell you, but it’s kind of nerdy, so I won’t go into it now.

For today, we continue in this series Neighbor, exploring how we are called in Christ to live in public, in community with others, not just with other Christians, but with the world. We’ll be in this through the end of February, and in particular, I know you are, as I am, looking forward to two weeks from today, February 6, on which we will be led by our youth in worship, and they’ll be sharing on this very topic as well.

And for this particular stretch, we’re in week two of a three-week look at the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke chapter 10, the story of a man who was beaten up and left for dead, and those who help him and those who don’t. Last week we started it, looking at the lawyer who was questioning Jesus and who declared rightly that to “inherit eternal life,” the sum of the law was to love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself. But then also at what might have motivated him to try to dull the edges of that call, asking “And who is my neighbor?” It’s in response to that simple question that Jesus offers this parable. We’ll read the first part of it today. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

Luke 10:30-32

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.

For those of you with any experience or familiarity in things like city planning or development or things like that, you may already know the meaning of the title of today’s sermon. If you didn’t catch it go ahead and take a look. “NIMBY.” You recognize it? It’s an acronym, referring to an understandable but nonetheless frustrating phenomenon seen the world over. Not. In. My. Back. Yard.

Even if you've never heard of that before, you can probably guess what it means. It means people can get pretty protective, even territorial, about what is close to them, especially if it means something new or different is being placed close to them. Usually, you can see it in places like heated town hall meetings or social media platforms. But the reason it's so frustrating is not because people just don't like different things. It's because this acronym "NIMBY" refers specifically to things that people in principle would say "Yeah, that's a good idea," but presented with the prospect of it—whatever it is—taking place close to them, they don't want it.

You can probably think of a few examples. Nobody likes traffic. Everybody would say, "Better infrastructure and roads and transit is a great idea." But then you find out they want to widen the road in front of your house to ease congestion, taking up a good chunk of your front yard, would you say, "Well, it's for the greater good"?

Or another one. Everybody would say, "City-wide plumbing and clean, potable water are great ideas. Definitely need that." But then you find out that, to accommodate the rapid growth of the city, they want to put a new sewage treatment plant at the end of the street, would you say, "Well, this is a sign of progress for our city. Going to help us grow sustainably"?

Or finally, everybody would say, "Help to the downtrodden is a great thing. So good to help the needy." But then you find out your next-door neighbor is converting their home into a homeless shelter, would you say, "I can't wait to greet the guests to our neighborhood"?

Or would you, to any of those examples, think something along the lines of, "Well what is that going to do to the neighborhood?" or, "What's going to happen to property values around here?"

It's an understandable response, one that I dare say all of us, myself included—I wouldn't be wild about it if all of a sudden there was a new sewage plant next door—all of us can be prone to. It's understandable because it's so easy to be able to affirm something in theory but then flinch when it becomes a close reality. The reflex, then, even for the well-intentioned, can be to keep such things at a healthy distance.

There are any number of ways we might understand the first two people to come upon the man beaten up on the side of the road in Jesus' parable. But one way to look at it is that these are well-intentioned, good-hearted people who have the reflex to say, "Not in my backyard." And it's not the same thing, of course. They're not at home; they're on the road; it's a bit different. But they're keeping their distance.

It's of course no coincidence that the first two people to come across the poor man left for dead on the side of the road represent the religious authorities of the day: a priest and a Levite. Some have gone to great lengths to distinguish between the two of them—the difference between a priest and Levite—and what their actions signify for their respective institutions, but there's so much overlap that I'm not sure it's necessary.

The point is, these were religious folks, and not just your every week attendees at the synagogue, but leaders, religious leaders. And even more to the point, this whole exchange got started with a few comments about the law, about Jewish religious law, about loving "your neighbor as yourself" and then "Who is my neighbor?" so who better to be able to apply their knowledge of the law to an all-too-practical situation like this one than a couple of people deeply trained in the law and its application: this priest and this Levite.

Individually they both come upon the man, see him, and then what does the story say they do? They "passed by on the other side." That seems awfully cold. Why would they simply ignore and abandon this man? Well, a few reasons maybe.

Maybe they know as everyone else knew that this particular road was notorious for bandits. Stopping for this man only made them a target themselves. Or, maybe this man was only *acting* like he was left for dead, but really he's just bait, and the actual bandits are just waiting for some poor sucker to stop to help, then they ambush. Best to keep your distance and get out of there.

Or, and this is where the law comes into it, which I think is more and more important since it's not just two anybodies but rather a priest and a Levite. Maybe they see him, and since he's half dead, maybe they assume he actually *is* dead or pretty close to it, and they both know that the law is clear. Don't come into contact with dead flesh, or you'll be "unclean" for seven days. So they keep their distance and pass by on the other side.

In all of those instances, the priest and the Levite's reasons for avoiding this man were understandable. They're not made out to be villains. They're behaving in a way that would have been considered reasonable at the time.

No matter the reason, hanging in the air over all of this is the lawyer's proclamation, by his own words, that the key to inheriting eternal life, the sum of the law is to love God and love your neighbor, and Jesus offers a story with an all-too-believable example of those deeply versed in the law who don't show love to the man they find on the side of the road. It's as if they could say, "Well of course we should love our neighbor. Definitely a great idea." But when given the opportunity to do just that, they say, "Well we shouldn't because of *this* or *that*." Sounds great in principle, but easy to avoid when it hits close to home. Not in my backyard, so to speak.

And before we go trying to dismiss the priest and the Levite as uncompassionate, putting their focus on the wrong aspects of the law that they miss its overall purpose, is it really that hard to think of how the church has done and continues to do the exact same thing? Understand, it's not malicious, just as the priest and the Levite aren't presented as villains, but do we say in principle, it'd be a great thing to show the love of Christ to everyone? But then when given the chance to show that very love to individuals or groups crying out in pain, on the side of the road as it were, do we avoid it, go to the other side of the road, saying it's "not our place," chalking it up to religious practice or even citing Scripture to support ourselves?

If this were a longer sermon, I'd go into more detail on that front. Who are the ones that we avoid or use Scripture to defend our avoidance? But I'll leave it to you to fill in the blanks. It's not hard to think about.

The church I grew up in was First Presbyterian Church in Nashville. Some of you already know this congregation. Great church. But its history might have a bit of this in it. You see, First Presbyterian Church, as the name would suggest, started in downtown Nashville, and it considered itself a downtown church for much of its history.

But then in the 1950s, as Nashville started expanding after the war, some of the leaders noted the growth in southern Davidson County and sought to strategically relocate the church closer to that growth. This was controversial. It'd be like if First Presbyterian Church here in Knoxville, which planted our congregation around the same time, instead decided, we're not going to plant a church in Sequoyah Hills, we're going to relocate to Sequoyah Hills.

It was divisive within the congregation. Some said the church would be abandoning its mission to be a witness in the heart of Nashville, embedded in the pillars of the city and its institutions and in service and outreach to the needy in the city center. The move ultimately was approved, but with a remnant of the congregation electing to remain in the original building, which is now Downtown Presbyterian Church in Nashville.

But the criticisms remained. Was this an example of the well-heeled Presbyterians moving out of town to be closer to where they lived and where more people like them lived, further away from those who might not live so pretty? Yeah, maybe so. But was it also a reason why First Presbyterian then grew into a 4500-member church supporting, among other things, a vibrant youth ministry which was a big reason why someone like yours truly ended up there, and more to the point, engaged in service throughout the city and giving away nearly a third of an annual budget of \$6 million, every single year, things that likely would not have happened had the church stayed downtown? Yeah, that's also probably true. That's a common enough story. It's not just First Presbyterian of Nashville that did something like that, but that criticism of being removed, distanced from the cries of the city lingered.

On down the road, a ministry in the city emerged called Room in the Inn. Its purpose was to serve the homeless by partnering with churches in opening up their doors regularly for the homeless to spend the night in the church building, and First Presbyterian of Nashville was an early partner.

First was still out in the suburbs, and the people that this ministry would be serving would be all the way downtown, so it meant picking people up, driving them to the church, hosting them for the night, and taking them back where they needed to go. Bringing those crying out in the streets into their back yard, so to speak. That ministry picked up momentum, and did so especially at First Pres.

Does it completely wipe away the criticisms of abandoning its mission downtown decades earlier? No. Does it make that dilemma between a church's immediate calling and strategic decisions any easier? No. Does it completely change forever the hearts and minds who may be all too eager to say, "Sure helping people is great, just not right here," not in my back yard, so to speak? Definitely not.

But it was a start.

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