
“Who do you want to be?”

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Luke 10:25-37

²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶[Jesus] said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” ²⁷He 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.” ²⁸And [Jesus] said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” ²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰Jesus 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. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” ³⁷He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

INTRO

Scholars tell us that “the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a notoriously dangerous road.” Robbers/thieves would lay in wait for an unsuspecting traveler and pounce assaulting them. Even “In the fifth century Jerome tells us that it was still called “The Red, or Bloody Way.”¹ Here in our 21st century experiences, we know the Road to Jericho.

All around us folks are traveling down their Jericho Roads. Roads that are rocky; roads that have taken them from the heights to the depths; unpredictable occurrences in career, family, education and health.

We don’t have to be in Jerusalem to see the Jericho Road, do we?

*COVID 19 has been our Jericho Road

*We have witnessed the Jericho Road through Breonna Taylor, Ahmad Arbery, George Floyd and others through the injustices of racialized violence

*We are witnessing the Jericho Road of undocumented children many still separated from their parents with growing media silence

*And this doesn’t cover your Jericho Road moments

¹ William Barclay, “Luke 10:25-37,” *The Daily Bible Study: The Gospel of Luke* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

One theologian captured it well, "...the Jericho Road...is the seventeen miles of violence and oppression. It is the strip of suffering. The Jericho Road? It's a symbol of suffering in the world. ... it is any place where people are robbed of the[ir] dignity and robbed of their love and robbed of their food and robbed of their freedom [and robbed of their right to the tree of life]. The Jericho Road is always with us."² And so is our neighbor if we are willing to look deeper and go deeper.

JESUS AND THE SCHOLAR

Jesus was helping the religious scholar who tested him with questions. When he asked Jesus about inheriting eternal life. Jesus knew that he was a scholar, so he told him to answer his own question and his response is familiar to us.

"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." "You are correct," says Jesus. I've always thought that maybe the lawyer wanted to one-up Jesus, out do him...or as a dutiful student of the law, maybe he simply needed clarification by asking. "...uhm, and who is my neighbor?" But with that follow up question, his motives are becoming clearer. Remember, this scholar wanted to know how he could live eternally with God. He has his answer. He KNEW the answer, but one theologian asserts that essentially, he was not satisfied with the answer. He wanted to justify himself and "narrow the quest for eternal relationship with God to a fixed, manageable determination. He is really asking, 'Who is *not* my neighbor?' 'Where are the limits?'"³ We like limits, don't we? "

We struggle with the largesse of the divine, and so like the lawyer, sometimes we "narrow our focus to this one, not that one."⁴

Republicans, not Democrats,

Democrats, not Independents

Whites, not Blacks

Blacks, not Asians

Latinx not Indigenous folks

Straight not LGBTQ+ folks

Gay and lesbian not bisexual

Cisgender folks not folks with pronouns we don't understand

Abled not dis-abled folks

Pro-gun not folks seeking legislation

You see what I'm saying? Yes Lord, I want an eternal relationship with God I just need to know who can stay and who can go. I just need to know how much of God's abundant love I can shave away. As Dr. Stanley P. Saunders says, at this point, the lawyer's "enquiry is focused neither on God nor the neighbor, as the commandments require, but [it is only focused] on himself."⁵

² Edward F. Markquart, "Jericho Road (The Good Samaritan) *Sermons from Seattle*, http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_c_the_good_samaritan.htm

³ Stanley P. Saunders, "Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture," in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery and Cynthia L. Rigby, eds., *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Vol 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 157.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁵ Stanley P. Saunders, "Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture," in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery and Cynthia L. Rigby, eds., *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Vol 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 157.

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

I'm sure he wished he had never asked that fateful question – **who is my neighbor?** Because Jesus calls us to look within and beyond our groups to grapple with the question – who is my neighbor? And so, Jesus responded in the way that he often did in his spiritual teachings...in parables...subversive word stories with images in story that would convey some ultimate lesson or truth.

And in the parable, when that man was assaulted, robbed and left for dead on the Jericho Road, the story goes that **A PRIEST APPROACHED**, but when the priest saw the victimized man he crossed to the other side of the road and kept on going his way. Then **THE LEVITE** (who is a temple assistant) approached and he passed by, crossing to the other side as well.

SAMARITAN/GREAT DIVIDE

But then a Samaritan was traveling and came near... **SAMARITAN. We add the adjective – GOOD.** It is not uncommon to hear of some gesture of kindness described as a THE GOOD SAMARITAN. There is a warm feeling that rises up in us when we hear the expression – Good Samaritan. Given the multiple tragedies and events of human suffering recently and some occurring even now, we have heard of Good Samaritans running to the rescue of others, running into burning buildings to attempt to save lives, not because of folks' race, religion, gender or sexual orientation. Oh, but the original hearers of this story would not have felt warm feelings at hearing the word Samaritan. And they certainly wouldn't attach goodness to Samaritans. Why? Because there was a great divide – the widest of ethnic, cultural and religious chasms. There was deep hostility, the bitter bitter tension between Jews and Samaritans at the time. So, it is **this** person, from **that** despised community who is traveling down the road in Jesus' parable. Think about the audience, the original hearers... Keep in mind, Jesus was a Jew. He knew better than anybody the feelings of his community towards Samaritan persons. So, he knows **precisely** the folks he is addressing. In the continuation of the story, when listeners heard the word 'Samaritan' the average person would have grimaced...just in the hearing of the name.

Jesus continues... "**But a Samaritan while traveling CAME NEAR HIM. AND WHEN HE SAW HIM, HE WAS MOVED WITH PITY.** He (the Samaritan) went to him and bandaged his wounds, poured curative agents, oil and wine on his wounds. Then he put the injured man on his own animal, brought him to an inn or hostel, and took care of him. Now... anyone would agree that this is indeed enough. He has shown compassion. But wait a minute. **The next day** the Samaritan gave the innkeeper two coins, and said, 'Take care of him; and **WHEN I COME BACK** – yes I'm coming back to check on him – my compassion is still in action, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' (So whatever expenses you incur in my absence, go ahead and add them to my tab, and count on my payment of them.) My God!

Jesus addresses the lawyer with a final question... Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The lawyer, unable and unwilling to even **UTTER** the word Samaritan, says, "The **ONE** who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

RISKY/DANGEROUS/COSTLY

But friends, you and I know, to do likewise is in many cases, very risky, dangerous and costly. Sometimes crossing to the other side of the road is to save our lives. To not cross, could cost us our lives. What if it's a trap? Those who assaulted the man, may still be in the area. Or maybe you already have enough on your plate. Don't want to get involved. Don't have the time to get involved. Ya know, some scholars suggest that the Priest and the Levite erred on the side of **caution** instead of compassion. "The man on the side of the road, surely looked dead...and according to custom, touching the dead, literally touching a corpse would have rendered the priest and the Levite unclean. This would have made their social interactions impossible."⁶ The law is clear here. But what I never considered before is that the priest and Levite were not on their way to temple worship, they were leaving – going down to Jericho. "So, defilement would not be an overriding concern."⁷ Whatever their motives for crossing to the other side of the road, I stand in no judgement over them. I believe they counted the cost of compassion and made their choice. And there is a cost. And many of us "fear the cost of compassion."⁸

THE GREAT DIVIDE

The text says that the Samaritan was traveling, saw the wounded man and he came near him. I'm thinking of the decisions the Samaritan had to make in the moment. I'm thinking of all he had to quickly negotiate, especially upon the realization that the wounded man was a member of **that** race and culture.

*I'm thinking of the rough terrain he had to navigate, not just the terrain of the physical road, but the rough and perilous MENTAL terrain of bigotry, prejudice and hatred that he may have had to make his way through because of the enmity between the two cultures

*I'm thinking of the approval of others that he had to forsake in that moment.

I'M THINKING OF THE GREAT DIVIDE and generational hostilities between those two cultures. There was indeed a great divide between these two men; a wide chasm that seems impossible to cross; a wall of division that seemed impenetrable.

MERCY

Oh, but that day on the Jericho Road, MERCY MET THE GREAT DIVIDE. Oh yeah, MERCY AND THE GREAT DIVIDE COLLIDED THAT DAY. Mercy.

The theologian, Richard Rohr reminds us that Jesus said, "Those who show mercy will have mercy shown to them" (Matthew 5:7). [And so Rohr says] For the flow [of mercy] to happen, there must be a full opening on both ends, receiving and giving, giving and receiving."⁹ And sisters and brothers we need that flow. We need a steady flow of mercy. But to make room for that flow of mercy within us, something in us has to open up. Do I have a witness? And this opening that allows us all to be conduits of mercy is in conflict with the status quo. Howard Thurman, African American educator, theologian and civil rights leader, said, "The movement of

⁶ Murray Andrew Pura "Exodus, Luke," in Richard J. Foster, ed., *Renovaré: The Life with God Bible, New Revised Standard Version with the Deuterocanonical Books*. (New York, NY: Harper One, 2005), 1905.

⁷ Stanley P. Saunders, "Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture," in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery and Cynthia L. Rigby, eds., *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Vol 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 157.

⁸ Andrew Prior, "On the same page as Jesus" *One Man's Web*, <https://www.onemansweb.org/theology/the-year-of-luke-2019/on-the-same-page-as-jesus-luke-1025-37.html>

⁹ Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, "Awakening to Mercy" *Center for Action and Contemplation*, <https://cac.org/awakening-to-mercy-2016-04-01/>

the Spirit of God in the hearts of men [and women] often calls them to act against the spirit of their times.”

WE ARE ONE/INTERDEPENDENCE

We need a steady flow of mercy in these times. We need a steady flow of mercy – because the assumption many of us make is that we will never be the one in the ditch. Because of our station in life. Because of privilege and the many ways that we carry it, sometimes we only see ourselves as the one dispensing or giving the help and the care. But part of the transformation is knowing that at *any* time *we* could be the one injured on the roadside of life. Do I have a witness today? As the old folks would say, it could be any of us because LIFE IS LIFE.

- *We could be the victim racism, sexism, misogyny, religious persecution
- *We could be the one harassed, abused, disrespected because of sexual orientation or gender identity
- *WE COULD BE ON ROADSIDE OF LIFE – WE COULD BE THE ONE!!
- *We could be the one whose anxiety is debilitating keeping us in isolation
- *We could be the ones experiencing food insecurity and hunger
- *We could be the one struggling financially
- *We could be the one living in shame because of domestic violence or sexual assault
- *We could be the one trapped in the penal system that is not restorative, but one based on retribution
- *WE COULD BE ON THE ROADSIDE OF LIFE – WE COULD BE THE ONE
- *Ohhh but the revolutionary truth here is that not only could we be on the roadside of life – but because of our interconnectedness – our interdependence – if you’re on the side of the road in trouble, so am I!!!!

Molly Fumia, says, “We should never doubt the transformative power of compassion. When the torment of one person leads another deeper toward the inner-self drawn by the great love that is waiting there, then all of humanity has taken one marvelous step forward.”¹⁰ And the individual realizes that he or she has essentially helped himself/herself.

As The Rev. Traci Blackmon, said, “We are in a moment in time when the ONLY hope one has of saving one’s self, rests in one’s willingness to risk saving another.”¹¹ Sometimes, in order to reach out to others, accept others, one must put oneself in the ditch. We must "place" ourselves within the narrative of other folks’ lives. Or we must accept that the twists and turns of life can render us helpless, in pain, in need. COVID-19 has surely shown us that. Though this virus has shown us the racial and economic disparities in our society. There are many for whom riches and mansions could not shield them from catching this virus and some succumbing to it.

If we accept the ultimate truth of interdependence, then we can conclude that the Samaritan did not just save the battered man’s life. He was saving his own. And let me give thanks for what the Spirit has revealed here. I don’t think this was the Samaritan’s first time doing this. He’s been

¹⁰ Molly Fumia, *Safe Passage: Words to help the Grieving Hold Fast and Let Go* (Berkeley, CA: Conari Press, 1992), 250.

¹¹ Rev. Traci Blackmon, Facebook post, January 14, 2017

here before. The theologian Joyce Rupp helped me here. For she says, “Compassion takes practice. Like physical exercise, I must regularly recall the basic tenets and deliberately act on them if I intend to live this foundational virtue of Christianity. [She goes on to say], Even now, I am surprised how I can still slip into a pattern of forgetfulness when activities and deadlines crowd my days – too much ‘me-ness’ and not enough ‘oneness.’ This fosters and unawareness of how others are suffering.”¹² Sometimes in this story we don’t consider that Ohhh, THERE WOULD BE A BETTER FLOW OF MERCY if we could see ourselves in the other. The scandal of the story is that THIS is exactly what the Samaritan did. He didn’t approach the man, discover he was a Jew, replay the bitter history in his mind between the two cultures and go on his way. I love the text...it says, HE CAME NEAR HIM. (How many of you know that to help somebody you’ve got to come near? And it’s true that we cannot physically be present with all of humanity. But we are called to bring those who are far off in our minds, up close? The Samaritan came near. AND WHEN HE SAW THE MAN, HE WAS MOVED WITH PITY. The more I study this parable, looking in between and under the words, the more clarity I gain about just journeying in community. It occurs to me that when the Samaritan approached the man on the side of the road, he didn’t have a plan. His first act was a YES in his heart. I’m thinking of his vulnerability and how he had to relinquish control of the moment. He didn’t know what he would find. He had to come near to determine that. Sometimes we don’t begin – we don’t respond to needs and cries of humanity because we don’t have it all figured out. Anybody ever been there? When what we’re learning especially in these times, is that showing up – gathering together in the face of injustice, or just for someone who’s struggling in life, provides the creative energy that reveals what we must do. Remember that Howard Thurman said, “The movement of the Spirit of God in the hearts of men [and women] often calls them to act against the spirit of their times or [catch this-here it is] causes them to anticipate a spirit which is yet in the making. In a moment of dedication, they are given wisdom and courage to dare a deed that challenges and to kindle a hope that inspires.” Whew! My Lord! Anticipate something in the making. In other words, sometimes we don’t know what to do, we don’t have it figured out – why? – because we have not gathered together to create it! The spark in you or me has not been ignited because maybe I need the wisdom, creative energy in someone else to strike the match. Maybe I need the creative energy that’s at work in you, to connect with the creative energy at work in me. Maybe we need the way God is speaking to you to be in conversation with the way God is speaking in and through me.

The Samaritan showed up. He came near. He looked deeper and he didn’t see a Jewish person – he saw something familiar – the Samaritan saw himself. And here’s the thing, outside of his being moved with pity, we don’t have any information about the Samaritan’s character. We don’t know if he harbored prejudices. What we know is, he simply responded to this need. He merely saw a human being created in the image of God; he saw another bearer of the divine image...he saw himself and went from there. He allowed mercy to flow. And the wounded man was able to lay his burdens down in the flow of the mercy that was moving through the Samaritan. He crosses the enormous divide between his culture and the man’s culture and moves into what many have called...extravagant compassion. Something in the Samaritan understood the interdependence of life – that we are all interconnected. Who is your neighbor? Who is my

¹² Matthew Richard Schlimm, “Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture,” in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery and Cynthia L. Rigby, eds., *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Vol 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 162-163.

neighbor? Our neighbor is not one whose address is in our zip code. Jesus begins to answer our question - “The neighbor is one you do not know.”¹³ The one who is in need is our neighbor. The one in need of human compassion is our neighbor. And so is the one who shows mercy.

WHO DO WE WANT TO BE?

The Samaritan crosses the enormous divide between his culture and that of the man. Years ago, the morning after the Trayvon Martin/George Zimmerman verdict, the Rev. Dr. Roger Ray, a pastor in Missouri, preached from this very text. The tragedy combined with the anonymity that social media offers, have triggered deep racial hostility in this country. Oh yeah, this situation and many events since took the scab off of our nation’s racial wounds. This tragedy and others have made all of us revisit whom we mistrust. I was blessed by Dr. Ray’s insights. He says, *that in this parable, Jesus is inviting us to be bigger than our fears.* “Jesus told the story about a man who chose to be bigger than his fear. Bigger than his anger. Bigger than his sense of having been victimized or his need for safety or revenge. The choice that the Samaritan made in this parable was when he was confronted by a person he undoubtedly saw as an enemy, [or someone whose struggle was none of his business] he didn’t have to decide about what he thought about Jews. [Catch this now] **He had to decide who he wanted to be.**”¹⁴ Dr. Ray’s insight gives us pause. **Who do we want to be?**

Who do we want to be in these times? We have neighbors all around us. We are neighbors to so many others. Because we don’t have all of the answers, do we do nothing?

May we make our way to the roadsides of life – our neighbors are there. We will recognize them because we are there.

God bless you!

¹³ Hieraal E. Osorto, “Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World,” in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery and Cynthia L. Rigby, eds., *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Vol 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 158.

¹⁴ Rev. Dr. Roger Ray, <http://sermons.spfcc.org/>