

## And Who Is My Neighbor?

Sermon delivered by Rev. Stewart Pattison  
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church  
June 28, 2020

**Note: This sermon was delivered in two parts. The second part, following this one, was given on July 5, 2020**

### PART 1

**Scripture: Luke 10: 25-37**

It is important right at the beginning to make clear that it is *not* Jesus who asks the question, “And who is my neighbor?” It is the lawyer, the expert in the Law of Moses. Yet because of Jesus’ counter question, “*who was the neighbor...?*”, we tend to experience the question *as coming from Jesus*. This morning as we begin our series on this theme, it is critically important to be clear that in fact *it is the lawyer* who raises the question. It is not Jesus who addresses us but the reverse. We ask Jesus. And so it becomes pertinent to our understanding of the question to understand not only who is asking the question but how and why.

The first clue we get about the “why” comes from the first verse. “Just then a lawyer stood up in order to test Jesus.” The Greek word translated as “test” indicates a desire to lure Jesus into a false statement by which he can be discredited. It is an age-old strategy still in use today. If you cannot win a debate by the power of logic, facts and persuasion, try to trick the other into making some misstatement then pounce on it and never let the debate stray from that point.

Throughout the gospels Jesus avoids debate. His preferred way of teaching is by parable. A parable is a story that is literally placed *alongside* a question. It invites the hearers to make their own associations and to come to their own insights. It is not that Jesus has no point to make. But like a good teacher, he knows it is better for students to come to the realization on their own. Thus, instead of responding directly to the lawyer’s question, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Since Jesus has not fallen into the trap, the lawyer must adopt a different strategy. So, much hinges on the tiny and seemingly unnecessary word with which the lawyer begins his question: “and.” “And who is my neighbor?” The word “and” refers backward and forward. It confirms Luke’s implication of the lawyer’s motive. “*Seeking to justify himself he said to Jesus...*”. Luke here infers that the Torah expert is trying to make himself right in relation to the Law of Moses and to prove his superior mastery of the Law. It is what might be termed a

leading question meant to guide the debate to an assumed conclusion. By using the word “and”, the lawyer seeks to get back in control of the conversation.

We might dare to go more deeply into the lawyer’s motives by recalling the use of “and” in everyday usage. Someone says, “I know a person who could do a much better job than the current boss.” We reply, “*And who would that be?*” The question is often accompanied by a raised eyebrow and an upward twist of the mouth. The presentation seems innocent enough but, taken together with the attitude of the body and face, we detect suspicion, which betrays what the questioner really thinks. “*And who would that be?*” indicates that the answer is guessed at. The question is designed to expose the true thoughts of the original speaker who really thinks that he or she is the one who is better qualified and more able.

Yet there is a third possible dimension to the lawyer’s question, which is even more revealing and for our purposes more insidious. The Torah expert’s need to justify himself implies a doubt that he truly stands on firm moral ground. He suspects that he is not as righteous as he presents. In the presence of this rabbi he is uncomfortably aware that, in Jung’s terms, he has a shadow—a dark side which given his prominent position he cannot acknowledge. And so he seeks to avoid an unqualified interpretation of the Law. The question he asks is one of *calculation*.

This simple word also points forward to the inevitable course of the debate over which he considers himself in control. Yet the power of the rest of the passage lies in the fact that in Jesus’ response he is completely outwitted.

It is not my intention to rehearse the parable itself. Many of you could tell it to me in your sleep. Instead I want to reaffirm the fact that that we who hear are in the role of the one who has asked first. The question “*And who is my neighbor*” with all its overt *and* hidden agendas is *our* question. This morning we stand before the rabbi in whose presence, in the words of the Book of Common Prayer, “all desires are known and from whom no secrets are hid.” Do we hope to outwit Jesus in theological or scriptural debate? Do we seek to find a way of hiding our indifference to our neighbors or our complicit distancing from their suffering and experience of injustice? Or are we calculating how to maintain our righteous status as virtuous people while not having to step across from the safe side of the road to tend to a stranger? As I stand before Jesus the answer is an unqualified *yes* on all counts.

The bad news of the parable as I hear it is that I stand convicted. As a white American male who has consistently reaped the blessings of growing up in the United States, I have been protected by laws, suburbs and the benefits of private education. With but a few exceptions, all the settings of my life have been monochromatic. In the community in which I grew up, white racial superiority was taken for granted. Despite living and serving in urban neighborhoods for over twenty years. it is only now that I am becoming dimly aware that the life I have taken for granted has been *given to* people like me and structurally preserved *for people like me*. I have

been walking on the other side of the road oblivious to the stranger. Worse than that, when I have encountered a stranger who I fear I go to the other side of the road.

Of course I am aware of suffering and injustice. I have lived in primarily black neighborhoods and done seminary internships in black churches where the joke was that white Americans believed they were saved by *race*, not by grace. I have led and coordinated worship in jails and prisons where the predominant population was African-American. Nevertheless, I have been protected by an invisible wall, which has allowed me to have my enlightened social attitudes *and* the blessings of the accident of my birth.

Deep in my heart of hearts I know that there is something profoundly wrong with this state of affairs. It is my *shadow*. There is something keeping me from the full experience of what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called the Beloved Community. In the presence of the rabbi from Nazareth I am uncomfortable. I want to justify my life to Jesus and to those who have suffered at the hands of the very structures that have benefitted me. And so I ask my careful and safe but ultimately self-condemning question: “And who is my neighbor?”

I am grateful to the Rensselaerville session for allowing me to continue this exploration of the lawyer’s question next week. For as important as these reflections may be, they can become dangerous and counterproductive. Self-examination too easily leads to narcissistic self-condemnation and despair. After all, we cannot help the accident of our birth any more than anyone else. The affirmation that “God don’t make no junk” is absolutely true. No one, especially those oppressed by racism and social and economic injustice, is helped *one whit* by hand-wringing and cries of *mea culpa*. What is needed is a change of heart and complete transformation of our point of view.

The overwhelmingly hard lesson we must learn is that we cannot by the strength of our own character and good intentions accomplish this transformation of heart and mind. It must come, first by the belief that such an internal renewal *is possible*. Most importantly, it comes from allowing a power greater than ourselves to accomplish the change. I hope to say more about this next week. Amen.

## **PART 2**

### **July 5, 2020**

#### **Scripture: Luke 10: 26-35**

Last week I attempted to come to grips with some of the implications of the question posed to Jesus by the expert in the Law of Moses who began by believing he had the upper hand in this debate with Jesus. As we shall see today he ended up in the grasp of a power greater than himself.

The lawyer has asked the rabbi from Nazareth what he must do to inherit eternal life. In hindsight it is clear that he does not sincerely want guidance. Luke tells us that he seeks to test Jesus. That is, he wants to lure the rabbi into making a misstatement about the Law of Moses that will discredit Jesus and his ministry. When Jesus turns the question back to him he is put on the defensive. He gives the technically right answer. Jesus affirms his reply. “You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.”

Perhaps the lawyer picks up a note of irony in the rabbi’s tone. He has given the right answer but has he simply and reflexively repeated a safe and standard response? It is at this point that he feels the need to justify himself. In the presence of the rabbi he is confronted with the uncomfortable awareness that there is a chasm between his public belief and behavior and his interior attitude. He feels he must find a way to close the gap. And so he asks, “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus does not engage the lawyer on his home ground. Instead he tells a story about a man attacked by robbers on a lonely road and left for dead. Two people, both associated with the operation of the temple in Jerusalem, come upon the victim and move to the other side of the road. According to the Law of Moses, they are not wrong. They are prohibited from coming into contact with the dead. To touch the man to see if he is alive is to risk being separated from the community to be restored to ritual purity. To take such a risk might prevent them from performing their important work. It would incur the criticism of the community for being irresponsible and not having their priorities straight. “You did what? What were you thinking?” In these days of coronavirus we might say, “You went to the aid of a choking, coughing person? Don’t you realize you could have gotten sick yourself?”

So we must not judge the lawyer too quickly or too harshly. We who witness this encounter cannot be detached observers. The question “And who is my neighbor?” is *our* question. It is *we* who seek to justify ourselves. In the presence of the rabbi it is *we* who begin to be aware that our public behavior may satisfy our contemporaries but to Jesus we are exposed. There is far more of the priest and Levite in us than we care to admit.

In the aftermath of the George Floyd murder, we who are white and of European heritage are invited hear the lawyer’s question in a new way. There is a Grand Canyon that separates us from the lives of sisters and brothers who are a mere four generations separated from slavery and are still denied the opportunities and protections that we take for granted. I may condemn myself and this society as hopelessly racist and oppressive, wring my hands and cry *mea culpa*. But no one is better for that.

Another response to the question is to distance ourselves from the guilt and hide behind the excuse that there is nothing we can do. When this happens we can become people who, having brutally silenced the voice of conscience within, go on to try to silence it in others. Thus I

find myself scorning people like me who condemn structural racism and yet continue to live in racially and economically segregated communities.

Of course I can always comfort myself by condemning the overt advocates of white superiority and ultra-nationalism—especially when it is dressed in garb of Christian faith. But none of this addresses the ongoing tragedy. The lawyer’s question seeks to satisfy Jesus’ rigorous spiritual and moral standards while keeping his advantageous position. To quote my father in the faith, Dr. Richard Sellers, we cannot be saved by race and grace. But is there a way out?

Let me begin by pointing to the utterly unselfconscious behavior of the one who came to the victim’s aid. The lawyer’s question is calculating. He is weighing the cost and benefits of what it means to identify someone as neighbor. For him the word neighbor applies to the one who lives next door or who is a family member or of some association like a church. His neighbor is us. Attending to the neighbor, then, means responding to the needs of *my* people.

Yet clearly the one who attends to the man fallen among robbers has a very different understanding. For him neighbors are members of the human family without definitional boundaries. More remarkable is the total absence of calculation. He does not weigh the cost in time, money and reputation. He kneels, binds the victim’s wounds, places him securely on his donkey and takes the man to an inn where he personally takes care of him until he is out of danger. Then he goes on his way leaving funds for his charge’s continuing care. It is only then that Jesus discloses that the man himself is an outcast—a Samaritan.

When Jesus asks the lawyer which of the three people *was a* neighbor to the victim of criminal violence, he replies, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus tells the lawyer, “Go and do likewise.”

We miss the point of Jesus’ charge if we think that the lawyer is to stop at every scene of suffering. The deeper point is that the lawyer is to *have mercy*. This is not so much *a thing to be done* as a spiritual capacity to be nourished and cultivated. Being moved by the suffering of another is not an activity of nice people. It is the result of a deeply personal transformation. This transformation is nothing less than the overthrowing of our basic default reaction of self-preservation. When the transformation comes, there emerges a new primary response—that of compassion. Compassion is a spiritual connection of one human’s suffering with that of another. It expresses itself in an urgent desire to bring hope and healing. In this state I am not trying to make myself feel better by helping you. Instead this is a spontaneous and an unpremeditated response.

I want to close with a story related by Belden Lane in his most recent book, “The Great Conversation, Nature and the Care of the Soul”. In Eastern Europe, a rebbe noted that his son left morning prayers to wander in the woods. After a few days the father asked his son why he

did this. “After all, God is no different in the woods than in worship.” “Yes,” the son replied, “but *I* am different.” I propose that while God is the same on both sides of the road, *we are different* when we cross over to the stranger with compassion.

The journey from self-protection to compassion begins with the recognition that crossing the road to avoid the stranger is to choose isolation and spiritual starvation. It begins with the awareness that change in the world begins with seeking to cross the road and that we do not need to be afraid. Often that wounded one is none other than ourselves. It continues with the belief that there is One who has mercy and compassion for us. It is not the great acts that grow compassion for the neighbor but the ones that take us unawares and that become a small thread in God’s mending of the world. Amen.