

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 13, 2025  
St. Michael's Church  
The Rev. Joshua Wong

The Gospel: Luke 10:25-37

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But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

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

In our Gospel reading today, we encounter a smart lawyer who asks Jesus, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" After Jesus reminds him of the written law, the lawyer asks him, "And who is my neighbor," Following this question, Jesus tells him the parable of the Good Samaritan. Then Jesus asks him, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Amy-Jill Levine, a New Testament and Jewish Studies professor says that religion is meant "to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable." She suggests that parables are meant to afflict us. If we hear a parable and think, "I really like that" or, worse, fail to take any challenge, we may not be listening well enough."

This may be the case for us when we hear this often read parable of the Good Samaritan. Many of us have heard this story numerous times, and it doesn't challenge us beyond the surface. We read it, agree with it, and yet is unchanged. In this parable, we often walk away saying, "Yes this Samaritan was a good man, and the others were not, therefore, Jesus is saying, be like the Samaritan, go and do likewise."

There's nothing inherently wrong with that interpretation, but we should ask ourselves, is that all the "afflicting" this story has for us? Or does Jesus have more in mind? What would the original audience have thought about this parable? Would it afflicting them?

Perhaps it will help to place the story in its fuller context. As Luke tells it, the lawyer says, "But who is my neighbor." Being the smart lawyer that he is, I wonder if what he really meant was, "Who is *not* my neighbor? Can you be specific Lord? Where should I draw the line? Outside my front door? At the edges of my neighborhood? We can't be neighbors with everyone, can we Lord? Maybe we ask those same questions to God as well. Isn't there a line to draw?

Sometimes we are afraid of asking the same question "who is my neighbor," because we don't want to know the truth about where the line is drawn. This week,

I had lunch at Home Girl Cafe with my dear colleague, the Rev. Kate Cress from St. James in the City. We not only had a delicious meal, but more striking were the employees there that that served us who use to be gang members. They were enthusiastic and polite. As some of you know, Father Greg Boyle started Homeboy Industry in 1988. It began as a program called "Jobs for a Future," to provide employment and training opportunities for young people involved in gangs. For Father Boyle, I'm sure he once asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor." Just like the lawyer, he might have asked the Lord, "Where should I draw the line? Outside my front door of the church? At the edges of my neighborhood? For him, Jesus said, "there is no limit, the gang members in Los Angeles are your neighbors," which inspired him to write his first book, *Tattoos On The Heart, The Power of Boundless Compassion*.

Jesus seems to say the same to the lawyer, there is no line. Do this. Extend kindness. Live out your theology in hands-on care. Because there is boundless compassion.

Yet, is there more Jesus is saying here? What else are we missing?

What if the story changes depending on where we locate ourselves within it? If you're like me, you probably locate yourself in the priest and the Levite on your bad days, and in the Good Samaritan on your good days. But, what if this parable

was a reversal story? A story intended to question our understanding of good and bad, who's IN and who's OUT? What is sacred and profane, and who is the benefactor and the recipient? It's too easy for us to comfortably identify with the Good Samaritan. Maybe the whole point of this story is that the Samaritan is not us. Wow, now it's beginning to hurt.

You see, at that time when Jesus told this parable, the Samaritans and the Jews hated each other. There had been a long history of disagreements and disrespect towards each other. Both sides thought their history, culture, blood line, theology, even their interpretation of the Torah was better than the other. Does that sound familiar to us today?

When we read this story today, we are inclined to love the Samaritan, but during Jesus's day, the choice to make a Samaritan "good," to make him the hero of the story, was nothing less than scandalous and a sock in the stomach to his original listeners, the Jews.

To put this in more contemporary language, the Samaritan was the "other," the "less than" in society. They were the object of condescension, disgust, and judgment. Which leads us to ask ourselves who are the "others" in our 21st century? Who is the last person on earth you would ever want to think is "the good

guy?" The last person you would ever want to ask for a favor — much less owe your life to?

May I throw out some possible scenarios? What if a progressive Democrat is robbed, and a far-right Republican saves her life. A racist white cop is robbed, and an African-American teenager saves his life. A transgender woman is robbed, and an anti-LGBTQ activist saves her life. An outspoken atheist is robbed, and a Bible-thumping fundamentalist saves his life. A border patrol agent is robbed, and an undocumented immigrant saves his life. Wasn't this the case in the parable story? A Jew was robbed, left to die on the roadside, and a Samaritan saved his life. So, who then is our neighbor?

In our world today, we are clearly divided on different sides, each thinking they are right and the other wrong. It was not that different in Jesus' time. The enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans was embodied and real. What Jesus did in this parable when he deemed the Samaritan "good" was radical and risky for his Jewish listeners but intentional. Jesus was inviting them to consider the possibility that a person might add up to more than the sum of her political, racial, cultural, and economic identities. Just as we heard from last week's homily to avoid prejudice, Nobel laureate Amartya Sen reminds us to understand people as multi-complex layers of humanity. Jesus was doing the same here, he called them to put

aside the history they knew, and the prejudices they nursed and to love their neighbor by leaving room for His divine intervention that can come from the least expected people.

How does this parable afflict us today? It means reading this parable with a new perspective. By locating ourselves, not in the priest, the Levite, nor even the Samaritan, but locating ourselves in the wounded man that was dying on the side of the road. Maybe Jesus is asking us to become the broken person, grateful to anyone at all who will show us mercy before we can feel the unbounded compassion of the Good Samaritan. Sometimes in life, until we experience mercy, we cannot truly understand mercy. Until we have experienced destitution, we cannot feel how a poor person lives. Metaphorically, we will not experience mercy until we experience being the one left dying and someone came to show us mercy. As Amy Jill-Levine says, “Because all tribalisms fall away on the broken road, all divisions of “us” and “them” disappear of necessity.” When you're lying bloody in a ditch, what matters is not whose help you'd prefer, whose way of practicing Christianity you like best, or whose politics you agree with. What matters is whether or not anyone will stop to show you mercy before you die.

One day, we will all encounter dark roads. It may be in a hospital room; a graveside; after a broken marriage; or when a cherished job ends. When it does, it

won't be your theology that saves you. It won't be your cherished affiliations that matter. It will be from the one that extends their love to you, even from someone you never wish you'd touch.

"Who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked. Jesus answered. Your neighbor is the one who upends all your entrenched categories and shocks you with the fresh face of God. Your neighbor is the one who mercifully steps over all of our biases that separates "us" from "them," and teaches you the real meaning of "Good."

What shall we do to inherit eternal life? Recognize yourself **not** as the Samaritan, but in the desperate victim, and allow the least expected to snatch you back from death. This is where you'll find God. Do this and you will live. Amen.