

For Your Neighbors: The Example

Luke 10:25-37

Hello Neighbor!

We are in a series that is asking a really important question: what does it mean to be “for your neighbors.” And by neighbors...I mean those who literally live right around you. Why does this matter? Because Jesus said so. Last week we heard him say that the greatest commandment was really a twofer: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...AND you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The first and essential thing is that we love God with everything we have. BUT...attached to that... linked to that God-love, is neighbor-love. That’s how important this is to Jesus.

The Greek word for “neighbor” is literally “the nearby one.” The most obvious definition is the simplest: those who live near us. As we will see today, “neighbor” can mean MORE than that. But it surely doesn’t mean any less than that. So what would be our first step in loving our literal, right-next-door neighbors? We need to know them! How can we love our neighbor if we don’t even know their name?

This was your assignment: to write down the names of your eight closest neighbors on this chart. Tic-tac-toe If you weren’t here last week...or if you lost it...or if you were naughty and threw it away...here it is again. This is the Toone chart. Ours is bigger because we wanted to include all 18 houses on our block. We taped it inside a well-used kitchen cupboard door so we see it all the time. This may seem simplistic to you...or even silly...but if you are introverted; if you usually drive into your castle and pull up the drawbridge...this is a HUGE first step towards loving your neighbor.

So...did you do it...or did you think, “I know Jesus said this is part of the GREATEST commandment...but he didn’t REALLY mean it literally, did he?” Well, yes he did. And in Luke’s version of the story, we see how seriously he did....as we listen to perhaps the greatest parable ever taught. Luke 10:25-37.

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put Jesus to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And 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 answered correctly; do this, and you will live.” But the lawyer, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who IS my neighbor?”

OK...let's pause here. The lawyer's question is self-serving. What are the boxes I need to check to make SURE I've earned my place in heaven? Jesus flips question on him. "What does the Bible say?" The lawyer answers, "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."

Jesus replies: "Yep. You got it right. Love God with everything you have...love your neighbor with everything you have...do these two things and you're good to go."

NOW...the lawyer could have left well enough alone! After all, he got an "A" from the rabbi. But that isn't good enough. And now we discover his motivation. He wanted to "justify himself." In other words, he wants to know the bare minimum he must do to check off those boxes. He feels confident about the God box; most fundamentalists are confident that they have the whole God thing nailed down. But it's that second part he wants to clarify. So he asks a very revealing question: "...who IS my neighbor?" And Jesus doesn't like that question at all, as we soon discover.

Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, 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. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."

Jericho is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. It sits 846 feet BELOW sea level in a lush oasis. At the time of Jesus, it was the most popular bedroom community for the priests who worked in the temple but didn't want to live in Jerusalem. It was the Gig Harbor to their Seattle. But with one big difference. I-5 was infamously treacherous. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was 18 miles long and descended 3400 feet through craggy hillsides pock-marked with caves...which were perfect hideouts for the thugs who preyed on the commuters.

Jesus uses this well-known setting for his most well-known parable. A man is traveling that dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho. We ASSUME he is a Jew but we are not told so. He is attacked by a band of robbers who strip him, beat him and leave him lying in a coma on the road.

Fortunately, along comes a priest; a respected religious leader with great responsibility. In our parlance, we might call him a Senior Pastor. Of course, we would expect this clergyman to have mercy upon this poor fellow. Alas, without explanation, we are told that "he passed by on the other side." Remember, that road is narrow and bounded with cliffs...so "passing by" probably looked like this.

One of my LifeGroup members was convicted by this story Friday because, just the day before on a street in Seattle, he had *literally* stepped over a woman on the sidewalk without any word or act of kindness in the process. He passed her by.

A few weeks ago I was sitting in the Spokane airport waiting for a flight. An older woman sat down next to me with a dog carrying case. I thought, "Great...a comfort dog." I have had some very unpleasant flights with uncomfortable comfort dogs. Her dog was already yowling. It was obviously upset. The woman zipped open the case...and this is what I saw. An electronic comfort dog...that moves, barks and whimpers. And when she scratched its head, the dog "quieted down."

And I thought, "Isn't that sweet. This poor woman is so stressed out over flying, that she brought along an electronic comfort dog to keep her company." Do you think that is what your sensitive Pastor thought? Nope. I actually thought, "This is nuts. You've got to be kidding me." And then, in a supreme act of empathy...I snuck out my phone and snapped a clandestine picture...because I knew no one would believe me.

Upon reflection...I am ashamed of myself. Because in that moment, like the priest in our story, I "passed by on the other side." I didn't have the compassion to ask, "Are you nervous about flying?" or "Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?" I didn't pause to think that she might have Alzheimer's or a debilitating phobia. I just passed her by on the other side--and snapped a memento along the way. Not very heroic.

Jesus' listeners would have expected the priest...to be the hero of the story. He was not. But then comes the Levite. Levites were Associate Pastors...like Pastor Ellis! But likewise, HE passes by on the other side. Again, this would have been disappointing and shocking; Levites were highly regarded in their community.

But you ain't SEEN shocking yet. Because now appears the hero of the story: a Samaritan! Samaritans were the despised and shunned enemies of the Jews. Their feud went back 700 years to when Assyrians invaded their land and intermarried with the Jewish survivors. The resulting impure race was called Samaritan. Furthermore, they were considered heretics. They worshiped God in the wrong way and at the wrong temple on the wrong mountain. Jews hated and mistrusted Samaritans and considered them religiously defective.

It is hard to translate how unsettling it would have been to hear a story by a Jewish rabbi featuring a Samaritan as the hero. But try. Imagine the person whose politics you despise; the person that has done you dirt; the person of no integrity whom you most disrespect; the person you would most hate being stuck in an elevator with. Have you got someone in mind? I do. Now...make that person the hero of your story. That's how shocking and disgusting this would have been to Jesus listeners.

Unlike the two respected religious leaders who “passed by on the other side,” the Samaritan saw the comatose man...and stopped...which would have been unsafe. What if the robbers were still around? He administered aid, put him on his animal, took him to the inn and picked up the entire tab. He even promised to return and pay any overcharges. It was incredibly costly...and incredibly inconvenient.

And that’s the end of the shocking story. Then Jesus asks the stake-in-the-heart question: “Which of these three...do you think... proved to be a neighbor to this poor man.” The lawyer can’t even bring himself to say the S word, “S...s....s...Samaritan.” He replies, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus responds, “You go and do likewise.”

Did you notice, Jesus never answers the lawyer’s original question. He had asked, “So... WHO is my neighbor?” In other words, tell me precisely to whom I must be nice so I don’t waste my niceness. What is the minimum effort I must invest in order to fulfill this expectation?” But Jesus turns the question around: “Who showed neighborliness to this poor man.” When the lawyer asked the question, he was looking for a noun. “Define ‘neighbor’ for me.” Jesus responds with a verb: “Which one “neighbor” the victim?”

Let’s bring this back home: learning your neighbor’s names is a good first step. But THEN...the next and necessary step...is for YOU to “neighbor” them. To turn a noun into a verb. To reach out in an act of kindness. “Loving your neighbor” does not mean having squishy, warm, emotional feelings toward them. The Greek word for love here is agape. Agape is the HIGHEST form of love. It is “acting” love; the generous love that God showed this world when he sent his only son.

Neighbor-love HAS to be agape. It is not emotional. Not mushy. It is selfless and active. A love that notices...and serves. If we know the names of our neighbors ...but never take initiative to care for them...to do something nice for them...how will they ever KNOW we love them? And what kind of cheap, remote love is that, anyway?

Jesus said, “Agape...your neighbor as much as you agape yourself.” That’s a LOT for most of us. Most of us love ourselves a lot. So...here’s your next assignment. Now that you KNOW your neighbor’s names, look for some way to agape them through an act of service. Blow the storm debris off their sidewalk. Pull their garbage can up from the street. Put their newspaper on their porch. Drive them to the doctor. Join them as they rake their lawn. Bring a cold drink over on a hot yard-work day. Pick up the trash in front of their house. Grab something for them at the grocery store.

In order to love your neighbor...first get to know them. And then serve them. With NO ulterior motive. No spiritual bait and switch. No expectation of return on investment. I realized I was Pharisee-like the other day when I complained to Cyndi that I had done some nice things for our neighbor...and they never even acknowledged it. No “Thank you;” no note. Nothing. But so what? Agape love means serving selflessly without having your hand out waiting for some sort of tip.

One of your fellow worshipers got a jump start on this last week. She E-mailed me to say she became convicted during my sermon that, after three years, she had not really tried to meet her neighbors. She decided to do something about it. Here is what she wrote:

I must confess, while you were still talking, I began to look up muffin recipes. My husband nudged me with a look of disapproval, but I insisted my recipe search was related and continued my hunt for the perfect fall muffin recipe.

That afternoon my family of 5 walked down our street and handed out apple muffins to our neighbors and introduced ourselves. We were pretty well received, but realized that we were walking around during overtime of the Seahawks game... whoops! At least everyone was home!

Good for her! Obviously, the Good Samaritan broadens and shifts the definition of “neighbor.” But I would suggest that if you cannot “neighbor” those closest to you, it is unlikely that you will tolerate the cost and inconvenience of “neighboring” a complete stranger. So...I repeat myself: let’s START obeying Jesus’ greatest Commandment by loving and serving our literal, next door neighbors.

AND...let’s celebrate each victory. Two weeks ago, hundreds of us marked our home on a map with a blue sticker indicating WE were committed to loving our neighbors. That map is in the foyer over there. So here’s a next step. Starting today, if you do ANYTHING to invest in your neighborhood: learn their names...take them muffins ...rake their lawn... knock on their door to make sure they are all right... I want you to go to that map, take an orange sticker, and mark the spot where you did this. And every time you perform an intentional act of neighbor-love, do it again. This isn’t bragging. No one will know who did what. I would just LOVE for this wall map to become a witness; a glowing orange celebration of how seriously we are taking Jesus’s command to “love our neighbors.”

I want to return to a disturbing description of that lawyer: “But he, desiring to justify himself...” This toxic judgment reminds us of WHY we love our neighbors. It’s not a desire to show off or be noticed. It’s certainly not about making ourselves more acceptable to God. We love because he first loved us. That is what compels us. God came in Jesus to make us HIS neighbors; to love us like no one else could....to raise us to new life like the Samaritan did for that helpless, broken, injured man. That is what Jesus did for us.

We can never love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. But Jesus did. Perfectly. He loved us...MORE than himself. And when we realize that...when we receive that sacrificial love...it empowers us to love our neighbors for the right reason. We don’t HAVE to justify ourselves before God. Jesus has already done that for us! Love God with everything you have...and love your neighbor as yourself.