

“On Being a Good Neighbour”

“But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’”

Who is my neighbour?

The answer to that question was easy during my childhood years. I grew up in the same home, in a neighbourhood where most of our neighbours remained the same. I can still go down the block in my mind and name the homes of every family with whom we lived. These neighbours were more than people with whom we shared the same location; they were our friends, people on whom we could rely, people we could turn to in difficult situations in the certain knowledge that they would stand with us and have our best interests at heart. The people we called neighbours truly lived up to the highest standards of that title.

In my adult years, the answer to the question “*who is my neighbour?*” has changed. My ministry as a pastor has led me to move to many communities and congregations; Susan and I have lived in five different homes in our 38 years of marriage. In some of these communities, we have found neighbours who were also trustworthy and reliable; in other places, the people who were close to us physically were distant emotionally, barely acknowledging our existence. Some of our neighbours were delightful, while some were quite difficult. We have learned that the simple fact that someone lives near you does not mean that they are truly *neighbours*; a neighbour is someone who not only lives in the vicinity but is there to share life with you in all its joys and sorrows.

As he continues his journey toward Jerusalem, Jesus is met by a lawyer who asks him “*Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” (Luke 10:25). This “lawyer” was an expert in the Torah, the Law of Moses; his question to Jesus is not a sincere quest for knowledge, for Luke tells us that he asks his question “*to test Jesus.*” The term “test” (*ekpeirazo*) signals explicitly the challenge to one’s honour that is posed by such a question. The lawyer’s question centers on the issue of inheritance, the reward promised to those who belong to the covenant people of Israel as descendants of the promise God made with their ancestor Abraham:

- “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you,

and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” – Genesis 12:1-3.

This inheritance is understood here as “eternal life” or life in God’s Kingdom. The lawyer is “testing” Jesus either to show his superiority to our Lord or to seek to entrap Jesus so that he might lose favour among his followers and the crowds who have been gathering to hear his teaching.

Sensing that the lawyer’s question is a trap, Jesus responds with a question of his own, a challenge to the lawyer’s honour: “*Jesus said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’*” (10:26). The lawyer immediately answers, quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, which speak of God’s sovereignty over the whole of one’s life: “*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 neighbour as yourself.*” (10:27). This is, of course, the correct answer; Jesus has identified these two commandments as the greatest of all commandments in the Torah (Matthew 22:34-40). The lawyer has answered correctly, but there is more that is required: “*You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.*” (10:28). Being faithful to the commandments of the Lord involves more than knowing them; one must live in accordance with God’s teachings if one is to be considered a faithful member of the covenant community. Eternal life is found not only in knowing the commandments but in doing them.

But this answer is not sufficient to the lawyer; this third response to Jesus is intended as a trap: “*But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’*” (10:29). The Torah scholar appears to be hoping to limit the category of “neighbour” in some way; doing so would make adherence to the command easier, “*since the smaller the circle of one’s ‘neighbours,’ presumably the easier it is to act in love toward them.*” (Jeannine K. Brown). The first-century Judaism in which both Jesus and the lawyer lived was ordered by boundaries with specific rules regarding how Jews should treat outsiders such as Gentiles and Samaritans, how priests should relate to the laity, and how men should relate to women. Maintaining boundaries was vital to the social order and was considered a religious duty.

- “To ask ‘who is my neighbour?’ could imply selectivity, that some are neighbours and some are not: therefore, ‘who are the ones I am to love?’” – Fred Craddock.

Jesus' answer to the lawyer's question comes in the form of a parable that is set on the dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho: "*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.*" (10:30). The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous, descending nearly 3,000 feet in seventeen miles. The rocky terrain along the road allowed easy hiding for bandits who terrorized travellers. This unfortunate traveller was another of their victims; his assailants left him with nothing to identify his status except his desperate need.

Since this was a well-travelled road, it is not surprising that someone soon came along and encountered the beaten man on the side of the road. This traveller was a priest, one who would be expected to help a person in need; but shockingly, "*when he saw him, he passed by on the other side*" (10:31). No explanation is given for his failure to help this person in need; some have speculated that he was on his way to the Temple to perform his priestly duties and could not risk touching the man's wounds and becoming ritually unclean, but this is mere speculation. All that matters is that the man is still lying on the side of the road, beaten and bleeding, desperately in need of help. Soon a second person comes along and sees the man; this person is a Levite, another religious official on his way to Jerusalem who the reader would also expect to help a person in need; but once again, "*when he came to the place and saw him, [he] passed by on the other side.*" (10:32). The audience might have anticipated that the Priest and the Levite would be the "good guys" in the parable, but "*in both cases, the seeing of the man renders them culpable.*" (Alan Culpepper).

The man's fortunes change with the arrival of a third traveller, who breaks the pattern created by the first two: "*when he saw him, he was moved with pity.*" (10:33). Instead of crossing the street to ignore the man in need, this traveller goes out of his way to help him: "*He 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.*" (10:34). Even when he needs to continue his journey, the third man makes certain that the needs of the wounded man are met: "*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.'*" (10:35). His actions are the opposite of the acts of the Priest and Levite; not only does he not ignore the man, but he puts aside his own interests to make certain this person in need receives the care he needs to restore him to fullness of health. "*By his care for the beaten man, [he] demonstrates that he is a faithful man. The innkeeper will not have to worry about whether he will repay his debt.*" (Culpepper).

For Jesus' audience who first heard this parable, the expected sequence would have the third traveller identified as an ordinary Israelite whose loving actions stand in stark contrast to the callousness of the religious officials. But shattering all expectations, Jesus identifies the third traveller as a Samaritan. Samaritans were regarded by Jews as unclean people, descendants of the mixed marriages that followed from the Assyrian settlement of people from various regions in the fallen Northern Kingdom following its conquest in 722 BC (*"The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria in place of the people of Israel; they took possession of Samaria, and settled in its cities."* – 2 Kings 17:24). Samaritans opposed the rebuilding of the Temple and Jerusalem following the return of the people of Israel from their exile in Babylon (*"Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build, and they bribed officials to frustrate their plan throughout the reign of King Cyrus of Persia and until the reign of King Darius of Persia."* – Ezra 4:4-5). The Samaritans had also constructed their own place of worship at Mount Gerizim in opposition to the Jerusalem Temple (*"Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."* – John 4:20). No one would have expected a Samaritan to be the hero in Jesus' parable: *"Ceremonially unclean, socially outcast, and religiously a heretic, the Samaritan is the very opposite of the lawyer as well as the Priest and the Levite."* (Craddock). By depicting a Samaritan as the hero of the story, Jesus demolishes all boundary expectations. Anyone who has compassion and stops to help is a neighbour. Like the first two, the Samaritan sees the beaten man at the side of the road; but seeing him, he has compassion for him. So when Jesus turns his question back to the lawyer and asks him *"which of these, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"* (10:36), the lawyer is caught on the very question with which he intended to entrap Jesus. But while this Torah scholar knows who truly acted as a neighbour, he cannot even utter the name "Samaritan" in his answer; instead, he replies, *"the one who showed him mercy."* (10:37). Ironically, the lawyer has given an accurate description of a neighbour; neighbours are defined actively, not passively. As an Arab proverb states, *"to have a good neighbour you must be one."* The duty of neighbourliness is an expression of one's love of God and love of others. Jesus' parable shatters the stereotypes of social boundaries and class divisions, and renders void any system of religious *quid pro quo*. *"Mercy sees only need and responds with compassion."* (Culpepper). By being so concerned about who qualified as his neighbour, the Torah expert neglected to consider whether he himself was acting like a neighbour. Jesus' final words to him and all who hear this parable are a call to action: *"Go and do likewise."* (10:37).

“Faith is due to God alone; faith receives divine works that God alone can do, and these works of God we can receive alone through faith. Then we should be busy for our neighbours’ sake and direct our works toward them, that these works may serve them. My faith I must bring inwardly and upward to God, but my works I must do outwardly and downward to my neighbour.” – Martin Luther, 1526.

Those who follow Jesus are to take on the role of neighbour to others, especially those in need and in desperate circumstances. This is a theme throughout the Gospel of Luke, as the Evangelist highlights the importance of compassionate care for the marginalized that was central in Jesus’ own ministry of compassion in this Gospel:

- “Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant...” – 1:72.
- “When Jesus saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’” – 7:13.
- “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” – 14:11.

The hero of the parable is the Good Samaritan, and this example of compassionate care for people in need has extended beyond the parable in common parlance. Numerous churches, hospitals, and social service organizations are named in honour of the Good Samaritan; there are “Good Samaritan” laws in several jurisdictions that protect people who come to the assistance of persons in need from lawsuits and liability resulting from their compassionate actions. The charity “Samaritan’s Purse” takes its name from the Samaritan’s paying the innkeeper for the wounded man’s care out of his own resources. The Good Samaritan remains the epitome of a person who selflessly cares for others, an example of compassionate care to which all persons of goodwill are called upon to follow.

- “What constituted the goodness of the good Samaritan? Why will he always be an inspiring paragon of neighbourly virtue? It seems to me that this man’s goodness may be described in one word – altruism. The good Samaritan was altruistic to the core. What is altruism? The dictionary defines altruism as ‘regard for, and devotion to, the interest of others.’ The Samaritan was good because he made concern for others the first law of his life.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.

Our call as Christian is a call to “*go and do likewise*,” to emulate the example of the Good Samaritan in fulfilling the law of the Lord to love God with our entire being and to love our neighbour as ourselves. In Holy Baptism, we are called to let the light

of Christ shine before others through our lives of faithful service “*so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.*” (Matthew 5:16). As we affirm our baptismal promises in Confirmation, we promise that we will “*serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.*” (ELW Affirmation of Baptism). The Christian faith is “*faith active in love*” (Luther), and a church that seeks to be faithful to our Lord’s teachings and callings is a servant church, “*a caring church that longs to be a partner in Christ’s sacrifice, and clothed in Christ’s humanity.*” (ELW Hymn 729). Like the Torah scholar, it is important for us to know what the Word of God teaches us; but then to be faithful to our Lord’s teachings, it is necessary for us also to “*go and do likewise.*”

- “[The Samaritan’s] goodness was not found in a passive commitment to a particular creed, but in his active participation in a life-saving deed; not in a moral pilgrimage that reached its destination point, but in the love ethic by which he journeyed life’s highway. He was good because he was a good neighbour.” – King.

I can still remember the neighbours from my childhood not only because I spent my entire youth among them, but because they were neighbours in their actions as well as in their proximity to my childhood home. Being a good neighbour involves more than location or presence; it involves devoting one’s life to caring for others, to seeing each person as a child of God who is worthy of our attention and care. Jesus intentionally identifies the hero of his story as a Samaritan, a member of a community that no member of Jesus’ people would consider a neighbour, to remind his audience that God’s love is for all persons, that even those who had been considered outsiders “*are an integral part of the people of God, and their inclusion in Luke’s story of Jesus indicated that God’s restoration of Israel as begun in earnest.*” (Brown).

Who is my neighbour? Anyone who is in need of compassionate love, of the care and attention that are due to all persons, because all people are precious in the eyes of our Lord, and therefore all who are loved by God are also our neighbours. May we be good neighbours in serving all people and thereby fulfill the commandments of our Lord to “*love your neighbour as yourself*”.

Amen.