

“How Is More Important than Who” (fn.:LUKE 10 25-37.2019.DOC)

Scripture: Luke 10:25-37

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Luke 10:25-37: ²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” ²⁷ 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.” ²⁸ And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰ Jesus 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. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ The 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.’ ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” ³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Here we have one of the most widely known passages of Scripture—where we get our phrase “Good Samaritan,” though he is only characterized as “a Samaritan” in the parable. So, before we jump to “Good Samaritan” stories, let’s back up a bit and look at the entire flow of our scripture for today...both what frames the parable and the parable itself. First, we have a lawyer (different from our understanding of an attorney)—this is someone steeped in the Torah or the Hebrew Bible...someone who seeks to live a godly-life...a life that will lead to eternal life. And, so this man knows the right answer about what is most important—love God and love neighbor. He just has a question about the boundaries of love: Who is my neighbor?

And lest we think Jesus did not speak about boundaries, recall these words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you. (Matthew 7:6) And Jesus was not speaking about literal dogs and pigs but was using “dogs” and “pigs” as allusions to people! Perhaps you have seen in some of those Facebook taunts and Twitter rhetoric how what is holy and wise gets trampled on and trashed and “trolled.” Many people simply close these social media accounts, so as not to have to put up with the dogs and pigs!

Jesus knows something about boundaries. So, let’s give the learned lawyer here a break when he asks, “Who is my neighbor?” Which one of us does not try to show how our actions are motivated by thought, care, and wisdom as we see it?

However, Jesus pulls a bit of a “fast one”—the initial question is “Who is my neighbor?” but Jesus deepens the question to “Who is neighborly?” In the parable, Jesus addresses: “How can I be a neighbor?” The parable begins with the traveler on the road down from Jerusalem to Jericho, who is attacked, beaten, and left for dead on the side of the road. And then the “rule of three” kicks in—the “rule of three” is standard in oral stories and jokes—the three little pigs, the three bears, the priest, rabbi, and minister, and so on.

Thus, “one” and “two” appear—a priest, then a Levite (both would have had taken rotations in duties in the Temple in Jerusalem). The priest and the Levite simply passed by on the other side of the road, with no particular reason given. But here’s a thought: the priest and the Levite did not stop because they were guided by that most basic human motivator—they were afraid. Their inner question that they asked was “What will happen to me if I help?” So, for example, here I am on the street in Knoxville, shaking hands with one of our homeless neighbors. What is one of my primary thoughts—“When can I get to a restroom and wash my hands?” I get the fear—“What will happen to me if I help?”

There is an apocryphal story from a century ago of a rich tycoon—a Donald Trump or Bill Gates sort—who was being asked for a charitable donation. The story goes that the rich man reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver dollar and flipped in the air, caught it, and then put back it in his pocket. He said, “I could afford to make the gift, but I can’t afford the interest.” And he moved on. In his double entendre with the word “interest,” the tycoon showed that he understood: To give would change who he is. He couldn’t afford the interest.

What will happen to me if I help? That’s the question of the priest and Levite. In contrast, the inner question of the Samaritan was different. The Samaritan’s question was “What will happen to this man if I don’t help?”¹ Not what will happen to me...but what will happen to him! So, I still don’t give any cash on the street when I meet up with a homeless neighbor, but I do try to stop and acknowledge the homeless neighbor. I tell them my name. I ask questions that invite dialogue rather than give advice on what to do. I am concerned, for example, what will happen to them in the sun or rain, when they are looking for shelter in the church’s driveway tunnel under the Fellowship Hall. And, if I can learn their name, I try to use it in caring way. At times, I even offer to pray with them.

The priest and Levite walk by on the other side of the road—that’s one and two in the “rule of three,” with three as the clincher. So we go from priest to a Levite...to...to...well, what is expected is a run-of-the-mill Israelite. An everyday Israelite would show the priest and the Levite the way things are supposed to be done—to love the neighbor as one’s self. Then the shocker—a Samaritan. As the scholar Amy-Jill Levine puts, it is like going from a story about Moe and Larry (two of the Three Stooges) to introducing Osama bin Laden into the story. That doesn’t fit! That couldn’t be part of the story. Samaritans and Israelites were enemies.

But here is the Samaritan, a fellow-traveler on the road. And he immediately stops to help. He uses his own valuable resources—oil and wine (the first-century first-aid kit)—to treat the wounded man. He uses his own transportation to move the wounded man to the safety of the inn. He spends money—equivalent to two days of work and promises more if needed. How remarkable! He uses his own resources—both in things and money—and he gives his time (stopping to help someone is rarely convenient). And, though we do not know if the Samaritan’s lifestyle changed, we do know that the wounded man was using the Samaritan’s transportation; that the Samaritan was covering the cost of staying at the inn and committed to more; and that he was spending that most precious of commodities—time. The Samaritan was likely cramped now in what he could do for himself.

¹ The suggestion on this motivation is not original to me—the two different questions (What will happen to me....what will happen to him) go back to Martin Luther King, Jr, as many commentators point out.

I remember the observation of C.S. Lewis on financial stewardship—he said if our giving does not cramp our lifestyle, then we are not giving enough. In other words, if we don't feel the "giving"—if our giving is just leftovers that we really don't miss, then we have not truly practiced what it means to be a person of faith and faithfulness. There should be tickets we don't buy; vacations we don't take; cars we don't purchase; clubs we don't join...because we have given it away. The Samaritan felt the giving—his belongings were used up, money came from his wallet, his time was monopolized.

It is at this point that Jesus breaks out of the parable and turns again to the learned lawyer who knew that love of God and love of neighbor were at the center of faithfulness. Jesus asks: "Who was the neighbor to the wounded man?" The learned lawyer cannot even say the word "Samaritan!" The lawyer can only say "the one"...the one who showed mercy. That one (but don't say "Samaritan" out loud)...that one who showed neighborly love. And Jesus concludes: "Go and do likewise."

More important than "Who is my neighbor?" is "How neighborly am I living?" Not who but how is more central. If you came to the Rally Day Breakfast last Sunday, you saw a tribute to the life and ministry of Fred Rogers, a Presbyterian minister, who hosted a children's television show: *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood* (over 800 episodes)—but with none of the glitz and pop of other shows. The producer of the show, Margaret Whitmer, said, "If you take all of the elements that make good television and do the exact opposite, you have Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. Low production values, simple set, an unlikely star. Yet, it worked."²

One of the most iconic episodes in Mr. Rogers Neighborhood involved his neighbor, Officer Clemmons. Francois Clemmons played the police officer in Mr. Roger's "neighborhood." Francois, an African-American, did not relish the role of playing a police officer...He, an African-American, with roots in Birmingham, Alabama, had grown up in the ghetto. To him, the police were those who turn dogs on people, used fire hoses to batter them (this is the 1960s), and threaten people of color. Francois did not want to be a "policeman" but Fred Rogers persuaded him to take the role.

At the same time that Officer Clemmons becomes a neighbor on the show (remember this is the 1960s), there was a current, news photo "worth a thousand words." The picture was of a white, hotel manager pouring muriatic acid in the hotel pool because African-American bathers had joined white bathers. The picture captures the grimness and determination of the manager and the panic of the bathers.

And, so in Mr. Rogers' "neighborhood" that always began with him putting on his cardigan sweater, there was this episode that did not include the cardigan sweater. Instead, Mr. Rogers began with an observation about how hot the day was. And he decides to cool off his feet in a pool of water. He moves to his "front yard" and puts his feet into a small plastic pool. And that's when Francois, the policeman, comes by. And Mr. Rogers talks about how cool the water is and, well, why doesn't Francois join him! Francois does....and the camera focuses in on four feet—two very brown and two very white in the cool water. Another picture worth a thousand words!

Nearly 25 years later, Francois and Mr. Rogers re-did this episode. And at the end of the episode, as Francois pulls his feet out of the pool and looks to dry his feet, Fred Rogers says: "Let me help you with that." Fred Rogers took a towel and knelt down to help dry Francois's feet. Don't you know

² <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7681902/characters/nm0926202> as of 8/16/19.

that a Presbyterian minister knew the 13th chapter of John—where Jesus knelt and washed the feet of his disciples!

Here in Mr. Rogers' "neighborhood," both men gave up something—Francois had to give up his anger at police. Indeed, Francois had to become "the enemy" that he knew. And Fred Rogers had to give up his place of privilege. He did not owe Francois anything—reparations were not his burden to bear. He had not done anything wrong to Francois.³ He could just live and let live. But, no, Fred Rogers had a burden—no, he had a "passion:" to live and let love! Mr. Rogers said: "Won't you be my neighbor?" The who is not important; only the how is. And we cannot draw lines of separation and distinction. What poverty is ours if only we have enough religion to hate, disparage and build walls...and not enough religion to love! No, for us it continues to be: "Won't you be my neighbor?"

³ See the wonderful article by Hannah Anderson for more details about Fred Rogers, Francois Clemmons, and their efforts of neighborliness: <https://christandpopculture.com/wont-you-be-my-neighbor-mister-rogers/> as of 8/14/19.