

Who Is My Neighbor?
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Luke 10:25-37

Who is my neighbor?

This question has been ringing in my ears for the past several days, thanks to another rash of mass shootings on July 4th. Highland Park, Illinois was the site of the worst of them, with seven people killed and another 35 wounded by yet another troubled young white man with a high-powered rifle. What the perpetrators of these violent acts have in common is a failure to recognize the people who are their neighbors – not just the ones who live next door, but the ones who are the fellow children of God and who must be treated as such. In the face of what is undeniably a pandemic of gun violence that is fueled by hate and racism, and enabled by easy access to weapons of war, I have to ask: why do we as a society seem to have such a hard time with the idea that neighbors are not just the people who look like us, much less being honest with each other about the fact that it's a problem?

In telling the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus doesn't deal with the "why" so much as he does with the, "What must I do about it?" As is so often the case, he uses the story to answer a tricky question that's been posed to him. His point is to demonstrate that just doing what the Law requires is preferable to making an idol out of the rules themselves. Jesus basically frames it as an ethics question. He asks the lawyer where the balance between the "good" of the rules themselves and the "right" of showing mercy is. In the process, he pushes the definition of "neighbor" well beyond the comfort zones of the people listening.

Like any teacher, he starts by returning the lawyer's question with one of his own: "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" (Luke 10:26, NRSV) The answer the lawyer gives is the *Shem'a*, the prayer that Jewish children learn by heart from the time they can walk, partially quoted here by Luke as: "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' command to the lawyer to go and live out what the Law demands of him is what bookends the parable, helping to drive home the point that "go, and do" is at the heart of how to live faithfully. It doesn't quite come across in translation, though the Greek also text adds the pronoun "you" to this command in the very last verse as an extra punch. Effectively, Jesus is pointing at the lawyer and saying, "YOU! Go and do what the Samaritan did!"

As far as the priest and the Levite go, it is helpful to remember that they are members of the religious establishment. The rules they had to follow as a result of their positions are what determine their actions. It isn't that they fail to notice that there's someone lying in the ditch on the other side of the road. The mere possibility that this person might be dead meant that even touching him was out of the question. If they had, they'd have faced both ritual defilement and the responsibility for the burial of an exposed body.¹ In the terms of our ethics problem, the priest and the Levite do what is "good" for themselves, even as that "good" comes at the expense of the guy in the ditch. The trade-off for keeping their ritual purity intact is that the rules around it become a tool of exclusion. They narrow the definition of whom the priest and the Levite can call

¹ Matthew L. Skinner, "Exegetical Perspective: Luke 10:25-37." *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 240.

"neighbor," to the point where it short-circuits any chance of their showing Godlike mercy.

Standing in direct contrast to the priest and the Levite is the so-called Good Samaritan. Despite the centuries of bad blood between the Samaritans and their Jewish cousins, he is the one who chooses to ignore social convention in order to provide medical assistance and shelter. It's both shocking and offensive to the people gathered around Jesus as he tells the story. It's shocking, because no self-respecting Jew or Samaritan would be caught dead talking to the other, much less providing care for the injured. It's offensive, because of the mere hint that a Samaritan was somehow the better man – all because he showed compassion to someone in need. He's the one who lives the Law, instead of merely knowing its contents, and, ironically, he becomes the only one who fulfills what God asks by doing righteousness.² It's in this act of righteousness, done by someone unexpected and perhaps a bit icky, that Jesus forces his hearers to expand their definition of "neighbor" to include anyone and everyone who might need mercy. This expansion comes at a high price. For the Samaritan, it's breaking cultural taboos against even talking to the injured man, as well as the large sum of money he commits to the man's care. For the lawyer who raises the question in the first place, the cost comes in the upending of his ideas about his place in the world and how he is to be in relationship with others.

It continues to cost us dearly when we fail to expand the definition of "neighbor" beyond just people who look, talk, and think like us. As a society, we're continuing to

² Marilyn Salmon, "Commentary on Luke 10:25-37." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-15-3/commentary-on-luke-1025-37> [accessed July 6, 2022].

pay it in the form of the seemingly endless supply of news stories about people being murdered, randomly and en masse, because someone's hatred and fear drove them to carry out that horrific act. That we as a society have apparently decided it is just fine to be afraid to go out in public, rather than take the necessary actions to deal with the underlying causes – both regulating the access to weapons of war, and addressing the mental health crisis of the young men who are so willing to use them - effectively means that we have failed to act on Jesus' command to go and do likewise. We become like the priest and the Levite every time we choose to shrug our shoulders, say it couldn't happen here and there's nothing we can do about it anyway, and go on with our lives as if nothing had happened.

If we really want to do something different, to do righteousness, we have to be like the Samaritan. Not only do we have to stop for the guy lying half-dead in the ditch, cart him off to the ER ourselves, and tell the admitting clerk we will cover whatever care his insurer won't, but we also have to listen to the story of how he got there in the first place. I mean, REALLY listen, without judgment or projecting any of our own stuff onto him. It's only then that we are truly showing mercy, and can begin to work together with him, and the rest of our brothers and sisters, to fix this massive problem.

It's through that act of listening that we can begin to exercise our power to solve this. As Christians, we have a peculiar call to "go and do likewise." That call requires us to act however we can. But first and foremost, we must also acknowledge that while our neighbors may well be very different from us, they are no less God's beloved children than we are – and we *must* treat them as such. We can no longer fail to speak out when they are not afforded the same privileges of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as

we enjoy. As Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, who died in 2016, wrote, “We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must — at that moment — become the center of the universe... Our lives no longer belong to us alone; they belong to all those who need us desperately.”³

³ *The Nobel Acceptance Speech Delivered by Elie Wiesel in Oslo on December 10, 1986.* <http://www.pbs.org/eliewiesel/nobel/> [accessed July 6, 2022].