

“Ask Again”
Smyrna United Church of Christ
July 11, 2010
Sermon by Katherine Raley

Luke 10:25-37

10:25 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."

Look at the person sitting next to you, or nearest to you. That person is your neighbor. Go ahead, turn to them and say “Hi, neighbor!” Now, I have a feeling that for many of you, this person is not just your neighbor in the pew this morning, but might also be your *real* neighbor – in a neighboring town, or a neighboring street, or a neighboring house. Some of you have been neighbors for years and years. Neighbors are important people in our society. Neighbors look out for us – noticing when things around our house don’t seem right, being on call when we need help, providing company for backyard BBQs. While I was getting to know about Bill Sperb this week after he passed away, I learned that he and Jackie had been neighbors before they became husband and wife – a different kind of neighbor. ☺ You can all name at least one neighbor this morning – I know that, because you can name the person sharing the pew with you, or the person on the next pew over. So, if I ask you the question “Who is your neighbor?”, you’ll be able to answer. So, go ahead and get someone in your head...now, Who is your neighbor? (congregation

responds) Great! We all have neighbors. The thing is, we have more than one, and even more neighbors than we might know about. Let's ask ourselves the question again, and I'll give the answer this time. We'll say all together, Who is my neighbor? Ready? "who is my neighbor?" (with congregation) Our neighbor is Maclaren's Youth Facility. Ask again – "Who is my neighbor?" Our neighbor is Afghanistan. Ask again – "Who is my neighbor?" Our neighbor is someone with different political views from our own.

Our neighbors come in all shapes and sizes, don't they? We have heard this story of the Good Samaritan before. It even has its own meaning in our society that the world has adopted from the Christian context – we have hospitals named 'Good Samaritan.' There are agencies that have 'Good Samaritan' in all or part of their names. There are even 'Good Samaritan Laws' in many states which are in place to protect those who serve to tend those who are ill, intended to reduce the hesitation we have to help others who are sick or injured, but are concerned with lawsuits or prosecution for unintentional injuries or deaths. We know the story deeply, and have made it our own. What, then, do we get out of hearing it again, of hearing yet another sermon on the importance of helping others?

I want to argue that it all lies in that question – Who is my neighbor? And, I think that not only is it good to hear the story again today, but it is *vital* that we hear this story over and over, and that we keep asking that question ' Who is my neighbor?'" Not only is it important to ask the question, but it is important to answer it for ourselves, not generally, but specifically. Each time you ask that question, I guarantee you that there will be a different answer. Ask again, and again, and again, to yourself, to God, because each time the answer will be different.

A lawyer – not our kind of lawyer, but in Judaism, an expert on Jewish religious law - came to Jesus and asked him two questions. The first – What must I do to inherit eternal life? Pretty key question, and we run into it over and over again in the Gospels. This lawyer got right down to the foundation of things – how to inherit eternal life? Another

way to read this is, how do I achieve eternal life *with God*? What's the point of eternal life if not with God? That's *why* we believe in the resurrection, isn't it, that new life is desirable because it's life with an all-loving God.

So he asks this question, and Jesus makes him answer for himself. He already knows it – Love God with all your heart, and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength, *and*, love your neighbor as yourself. Do this and you will live. Two different things. The lawyer pulls them out of different parts of the law, and his answer suggests that he's already been hanging out with Jesus some, and knows some of what he's about. This lawyer, an expert of the Jewish law, doesn't answer – keep every facet of the law, he answers that love is the important thing, and love of God and love of neighbor are equally answers to the question. Love of God is with everything you have, and love of neighbor is as you love yourself. The second part is there, I think, because without love of neighbor, without love of self and other, one cannot fully love God. Both parts of the answer have to do with loving God – it is through loving neighbor as self that we are able to relate to love of God, where God shows us God's love. Love of neighbor is intertwined with love of God.

To do this then – to love God with everything and to love neighbor as self – the lawyer asks a second question, one that I'm not sure he knew the answer to, at least as Jesus would have it. In order to fulfill this commandment, one must know who your neighbor is. He doesn't ask how, but Jesus answers both who and how. Jesus gives him an answer, but it is not quite the answer the lawyer might have looked for. Instead, it is typical Jesus form – a parable. Nor is Jesus' answer what we might hope for – it is not a general saying, though we might be able to pull generalities out of – a moral that we can live by. Jesus does not say “Your neighbor is your fellow Jew; nor does he state “your neighbor is the one you least expect to be your neighbor – the one you are enemies with, the one least like you, the one you might despise or fear.” That is the sense of neighbor we take from the story. It is not stated by Jesus, though. Jesus didn't make his answer general to

include everyone – Jesus made his answer *very* specific, as specific as one can possibly make it. He told a story. This story was meant for *those* set of ears – the ears that understood the roles that a Priest, Levite, and Samaritan have in that Jewish society. **Ears that would identify most with the man lying beaten up on the side of the road.**

Let's look at the characters of this parable. There is the Samaritan – the despised enemy of the Jew. A couple of weeks ago, and only a few verses ago in our Luke text, we heard about a Samaritan village that refused entry to Jesus, because of who he was, because of his mission, and because of the old feud between Jews and Samaritans. The Jewish lawyer would not have identified with the Samaritan in this story. Then there is the Priest and the Levite. The Jewish lawyer would not have identified with these, either – they represented a separate class from himself, and therefore a different world-view. The only character left then, is the wounded man on the side of the road, who we assume to be Jewish. This man has no identity, except life-threatening wounds, a vulnerable person, a person in need of help. Surely all of us, no matter what time or culture we're in, can relate to this. All of us have felt abandoned and in need of help.

Jesus' story, then, is a very specific setting in Jewish life. It is a story with Jewish characters, set on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, an all too familiar road for the audience of this story. This was a dangerous road that people most often traveled on in groups for protection. It was desert-land, with caves in abundance that were easy hiding places and homes for bandits. It is no surprise that this man was accosted while traveling this road. Perhaps the Priest and Levite had even seen it before.

While other travelers passed by, the man on the side of the road lay dying. Where was his neighbor? His neighbor was not in the people *we* might expect – the religious leaders, those supposedly closest to God. No, his neighbor was in the person that we would not normally describe as good – the person different from the Jewish man, in fact the enemy of the Jewish man. The Republican to the Democrat, the Indian to the cowboy, the Taliban to the American.

We don't know why the Samaritan stopped to help this man. We do know, though, that he stopped. Was he doing it to achieve eternal life? Had he asked himself the question "Who is my neighbor?" and decided it was whoever needed help, and then acted on it? No, probably not. He probably did not know Jewish law. Did the man who he helped know that the person helping him was a hated Samaritan? Maybe, maybe not. It didn't matter, though. He was getting help. His life was saved by a person acting on behalf of another person. It did not matter that they didn't know each other, that they were nowhere near neighbors. He acted neighborly anyway.

Ask the question for yourself again, Who is my neighbor?

Sometimes your neighbor is the person lying on the side of the road – the person you come across who needs help, in whatever form that is for that moment. Sometimes, your neighbor is the person showing *you* mercy – the unexpected person who comes to you in your time of need.

We keep asking the question, along with the lawyer, who is my neighbor? We keep asking another question, too, because it is a question that Jesus answers without being explicitly asked – *how* do I love my neighbor? Jesus gives very clear responses. Show mercy. No matter who it is. Accept mercy. Go out of your way. Take some inconvenience upon yourself. Don't worry if you never get thank you. Act as you would towards one who you know as intimately as you know your neighbor – someone you look out for because you share a close space with that person. Someone who is a part of your daily life because of their close proximity. Even if you don't like your neighbor. There is something about that person, who you see often, that brings you to look out for them.

Anytime we ask who is my neighbor, we ask because we want to get down to that vital understanding of what it means to be close to God. What it means to love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength. Each time you ask who is my neighbor, and you answer that question with a story from your own life, with an

example of someone who *you* can interact with, you get closer to loving with your whole being. The commandment that the lawyer quotes is love God with everything you have, in quite a detailed list – your whole heart, mind, soul, and strength, and, oh yeah, love your neighbor as yourself.

Make this story specific for *you*. Ask the questions again, and again, and again. How do you achieve life with God? Who is your neighbor? Every time you ask, find a new way to answer. There are always new ways. There are always new neighbors. Ask again.

Amen.