

Psalm 25:1-10

Luke 10:25-37

Rev. Irene Pak Lee, preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen, July 10, 2022

## **Please, Won't You Be My Neighbor**

*It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood*

*A beautiful day for a neighbor*

*Would you be mine? Could you be mine?*

*I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you*

*I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you*

*So, let's make the most of this beautiful day*

*Since we're together, we might as well say*

*Would you be mine? Could you be mine?*

*Won't you be my neighbor?*

*Won't you please, won't you please?*

*Please, won't you be my neighbor?*

That's a nice feel-good way to start the sermon today, isn't it? I seriously thought about finding a red sweater to put on and tossing my shoe from one hand to the next, but I'm not sure I'm quite as coordinated as Mr. Rogers. Many of us grew up knowing this program or watched it with your children or watched it as a child like I did. Mr. Rogers (who was also a Presbyterian minister, by the way) had a knack for making you feel good. He made you feel loved and seen, even through a television. He really felt like he was your neighbor.

It's a gift when someone can make you feel that way about yourself and it's also a gift to look back and think of someone like Mr. Rogers and have nice warm and happy feelings.

I think there are certain stories in scripture that can have similar effects on our lives, memories and hearts. This one from Luke is one of them for me. Even hearing it as a child, I could feel the snobbery of those who pass by the one on the side of the road, those that we expected to help. But then someone unexpected goes above and beyond to help this person in need. What a great neighbor. Feels good.

But as I was studying this story again this week, I read from New Testament and Jewish scholar and professor, Amy-Jill Levine, who makes the case that religion is meant "to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable." To comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. She continues to write that the parables of Jesus that we read and know should be those particular stories that are doing this

afflicting. Really? Afflicting us? Scripture should be causing us pain or making us squirm in our seats? That's the word she's choosing to use here? She writes, "If we hear a parable and think, 'I really like that' or, worse, fail to take any challenge, we are not listening well enough.

The hard part for me, personally, and I'm guessing for many of you, is that if you grew up in the church hearing these stories and parables in scripture, you know them so well that you do not read them as "afflictions." In fact, I struggled this week to get some motivation to think through this passage from Luke today because I've preached this story many times. I know this story inside and out, or at least I feel like I do. And it's hard when I am not challenged by scripture anew to figure out how to share it with you.

Because basically, all I really need to say to you today is, "Be a good neighbor-be a good neighbor like Mr. Rogers, you all. Be a good neighbor like the unexpected Samaritan in the story. Don't be like the priest and the Levite. The Samaritan is the one who shows mercy and kindness and goes above and beyond to help his neighbor, so be like the Samaritan. Go and do likewise. Amen.

I could just end there and it would probably make us feel pretty good because it's a decent challenge and a good reminder to be kind. It would also mean this sermon was super short and that means you could probably go home early. 😊 There's nothing wrong with this interpretation by the way. I have preached this interpretation of this story before. You have probably heard it this way before with different variations. And the truth is, we ARE called to imitate Christ and show compassion, care and concern for those in need. The Good Samaritan shows us how to do just that by going above and beyond. Go and do likewise, Jesus tells us. Be proactive. Do it. Great. Got it.

But biblical scholar Levine's question kept coming back to me this week. "Do you feel afflicted by what you just heard?" Are you uncomfortable with *that* message? So I'm asking you right now, Are you? Are you uncomfortable right now hearing what I just said? Are you in pain about it or squirming in your seats a little? Probably not...

Friends, this week, as I was almost "bored" with the retelling of this story in this way, I realized that when I read this story and put myself on the giving end of this scenario-showing compassion toward a neighbor or even an enemy-it makes me feel pretty good about myself and it's still a challenge I'm willing to live up to or into. Yeah, it might be slightly challenging to extend compassion and care toward someone I really don't like or even loathe...but personally, it makes **me** feel good and righteous and even a little bit like, "TAKE THAT COMPASSION, ENEMY" ...

But, but... as someone who struggles to *receive* care normally even from people I love, (I always feel like I'm putting them out) when I put myself on the receiving end of care...and from someone who I really don't like or even loathe... it feels different. Think about that for yourself. Doesn't that feel different? Receiving care from someone you hate. We don't like it. We don't want it. I don't want help from someone I despise. So let's ponder that possibility together today. What if the story changes depending on where we locate ourselves within it? And what if instead of putting ourselves in the shoes of the priest or the Levite or the Samaritan, what if it's a total reversal story and the whole point of this parable is that the Samaritan is NOT US. What if to be afflicted in this story today means that we are the wounded person, dying on the side of the road? Notice that this person is the only one not defined by religious belief, social class, or profession. They have no identity except that they are in complete and utter need. And that need is met by their enemy.

Because every time we talk about Jews and Samaritans historically and contextually in this story, we have to remind ourselves about the enmity between the two groups. They disagreed about EVERYTHING that mattered most to them...how to honor God, how to interpret scriptures, how and where to worship. Sound familiar to our modern day Christian setting at all? They practiced their faith in different buildings, read different versions of the scriptures and avoided any kind of social contact with each other whenever possible. They unfriended each other all the time on social media and pretty much hated each other's guts. A theologian wrote about this enmity: "Though *we're* inclined to love the Good Samaritan, Jesus' choice to make him "good," to make *him* of all people the hero of the story, was nothing less than scandalous to his original listeners' ears."

*"Think about it this way: Who is the last person on earth you'd ever want to deem "the good guy?" The last person you'd ever want to ask for a favor — much less owe your life? Whom do you secretly hope to convert, fix, impress, control, or save — but never, ever need?"* (Debie Thomas).

Listen, I know you all and I know someone came up for you. You're not struggling to think of someone. I'm not either.

But now, imagine it's THAT person that ends up helping and saving *you*.

Are you, as Levine challenges, are you afflicted now? Are you squirming a little bit now? ... I know I am.

Theologian Debie Thomas writes, "So what Jesus did when he deemed the Samaritan "good" was radical and risky; it stunned his Jewish listeners. He was asking them to dream of a different kind of kingdom. He was inviting them to consider the possibility that a person might add up to more than the sum of her political, racial, cultural, and economic identities. He was calling them to put aside the history they

knew, and the prejudices they nursed. He was asking them to leave room for divine and world-altering surprises.”

This parable that Jesus tells those listening is shocking on different levels and is offensive to everyone listening.

And so friends, what if today, instead of me asking you to think about when you’ve been the priest or the Levite who walks by because life is too busy and you figure someone else will take care of the one on the side of the road ... instead of challenging you to be the Samaritan and to go to the aid of someone you might despise, today, what if we dared to occupy the place of the one broken on the side of the road? What if we dared to imagine ourselves in the place of someone who was in such need that we would be grateful to anyone who would show us any kind of mercy? We’re not in as much control that way. Because these divisions and hatreds and enmities that we too, also have, with others, fall away on the broken road. When you’re lying beaten in a ditch, it’s not about who you agree with the most or who you like or who you think is a good neighbor, but who will stop and show you any kind of mercy before you die. At some point in our lives, if it hasn’t happened to you yet, you will feel that kind of desperate need.

And when it does, it won’t be your theology or ideology that saves you. It won’t be the affiliations you like and love that matter. Thomas writes, “All that will matter is how quickly you can swallow your pride and grab hold of that hand you hoped never to touch. How readily you’ll agree to receive help from the enemy you fear. How long you’ll persist in your Lone Ranger fantasy before you allow the unsavory Other to bless you.”

"Who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked.

Your neighbor is the one who scandalizes you with compassion, Jesus answered. It won’t always feel good and it might not be who you expect. Friends, if you are here and if you are afflicted today, may this message comfort you. And if you came comfortable into this passage today, may you be a little or a lot afflicted, recognizing that our strength comes from our vulnerability in the great reversal of the upside down kingdom of God.

I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you. I’ve always wanted to live in this neighborhood with you so, let’s make the most of this beautiful day. Since we’re together we might as well say: Would you be mine, could you be mine, won’t you be my neighbor? Please won’t you be my neighbor?

Friends, for your neighbor. For God’s vision of the neighborhood. Go and *be* likewise and live. Amen.

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' <sup>26</sup>Jesus said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' <sup>27</sup>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 neighbour as yourself.' <sup>28</sup>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 neighbour?' <sup>30</sup>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. <sup>31</sup>Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup>So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup>But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity and compassion. <sup>34</sup>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. <sup>35</sup>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." <sup>36</sup>Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' <sup>37</sup>He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'