

***Being Good Neighbors to All***  
**Deuteronomy 30:9-14 Luke 10:25-37**  
**July 14, 2019**

The story of the Good Samaritan is one that many of us probably heard when we were young, because it encompasses one of the deep truths of Jesus' message to us, to love one's neighbor as oneself. This makes it an interesting scripture to reflect on, because its familiarity makes us think that we already know what it is about. We have had plenty of opportunities to reflect on how it impacts our lives and our choices. Chances are we have asked ourselves how we might be good Samaritans in the situations that present themselves to us as we go about our lives. Most often, we hear this as a story about what to do, how to act. While this is certainly a part of what Jesus is conveying here, there is more to it than just figuring out proper actions. Someone pointed out to me that Jesus actually tells the story of the Good Samaritan after the lawyer asks him, "*so exactly who is my neighbor?*" The lawyer knew what he was supposed to do, how he was supposed to act. He had read the law and was so familiar with it that he could recite it by heart, "*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.*" He figured he had the law covered, but a niggling doubt had crept into his mind as he started to reflect on just who his neighbor was. How far did God expect him to take this whole neighbor thing? Who was he supposed to love, and perhaps more importantly, who could he safely ignore?

Jesus' response in the form of his story about the Good Samaritan, stirs things up a bit. First of all, Jesus used a Samaritan as the role model. This was a person who was decidedly *not* acceptable in respectable society, someone who was regarded as unclean by Jewish standards. Jesus' story showed this Samaritan taking care of the wounded man in a way that no one else was willing to. Just to drive his point home, Jesus recounted that the other people, the ones who turned their backs on the wounded man, those who walked on the other side of the street just to avoid him, were supposedly good, religious men, leaders, even!

The message comes across loud and clear, that being a good neighbor is not something that happens automatically, even if we have an important and respectable status in society, even if we are religious leaders or people in powerful positions. We are not good neighbors just because we do nice things for other people, even wonderful, amazingly selfless things. Being a good neighbor is a matter of *who we are* and *how we live* in the world on every single level. It permeates everything about us. Being a good neighbor is an attitude that extends beyond the usual folks around us, to pretty much everyone we encounter. We can't write anyone off. We can't claim that anyone is not our neighbor, not the folks who are different from us, not the people who live far away, not the people who worship different Gods or speak different languages or vote for different candidates.

*This is a hot topic right now as we see what is happening with immigration. So many people, looking for a better life, a safer life away from the gang violence and poverty of their homelands, have shown up on our borders, seeking asylum. Some come by legal means only to find that our nation is no longer honoring our own legal procedures for obtaining asylum. This pushes many would-be immigrants to come to the US by illegal, often dangerous, means, hoping to slip into the country unnoticed. As I wrote this sermon, I heard the warning that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was planning to carry out raids today, on Sunday, a day of worship, in an attempt to round up people whom they deem to be in our country illegally. What can we do? What should we do? I am pretty sure that Jesus would say these people are our neighbors, so what does this mean for us?*

*How can we respond? I am not really sure about what to do on the larger scale, but in my daily life I will do all I can to be welcoming in my interactions with every person I encounter, never knowing who they are or what challenges they might be facing.*

If you think about the story Jesus told, we don't know where the Good Samaritan was going on that day when he encountered the wounded man. He could have been on his way to an important appointment. He could have been late, even, and yet he stopped and took the time to bind up the man's wounds and then to transport him to a safe place where he could be taken care of as he healed in peace. The Samaritan embodied what it was to be a good neighbor, meaning there was nothing more important to him than taking care of the wounded man. I don't know about you, but I often imagine that if I wasn't working, I would have more time to do the kind of neighborly things I'd like to do such as going down to the border near Mexico to stand in solidarity with the immigrants, or even more of the simple things like visiting people in my community who are lonely, or volunteering time in an after school program. But life gets in the way of our best intentions, or so we like to say to convince ourselves that we are doing the best we can.

But what if it is exactly these kinds of things that are required of us, as God's children, as Jesus' followers? What if the whole "making a living" part of our lives is just meant to get us into the right places at the right times for actually doing the kind of things we were born to do? The problem is, that we often don't even know what it is that we are meant to do. Often it is the little, seemingly insignificant things that make the biggest difference in us and in the world around us. *Someone told the story once about life's purpose. She said that we don't ever know what it is that we were born to accomplish. She said perhaps the sole purpose of your life was that you would be walking on a particular street at a particular time on a particular day to say "hello" to a particular person. You might fulfill your life purpose without even know what it was after you had accomplished it. Because you smiled and said "hello" to that person, he found the courage to go on living, despite being afraid of ICE, despite having lost his loved one, despite being depressed. Your smile and greeting made him feel that life was, perhaps, worth living.*

One challenge of the perspective shown in this example, is that it tells of such a small act of kindness – saying hello to a stranger – that we don't even recognize its importance. We rarely go on a walk for the sole intention of saying hello to everyone we meet. When we walk it is usually with a different kind of purpose in mind, whether that is to get from one place to another or to get some exercise, or even to puzzle out a dilemma we might be facing (and if so, then we get stuck in our own heads and don't even notice anyone else). It doesn't really work for us to outline all of the things we ought to do every day in order to express our love for one another, and then attempt to do them all. What really needs to happen, is that we need to *become* good neighbors. It needs to become a part of our DNA. If it is simply who we are, then we will live in ways that express love and compassion as a matter of course, simply as a side effect of who we are. We don't have to think about what to do, we just do it. We don't have to ask ourselves, "how can I be a good neighbor, a good Samaritan in this situation?" Compassion and love simply flow from who we are, and we can't really help ourselves. We *are* good neighbors by default, because as God's beloved children we can't help ourselves.

*Loving God, we are grateful that you have taught us so well to be good neighbors, to be kind and loving, to show compassion. We do not always live up to your desires for us. We often fall short of loving as fully as you love, but we trust that with your guidance we can become better neighbors to all of your children everywhere. Help us to follow Jesus in this important way, Amen.*

