

Who is My Neighbor? Luke 10:25-37

If someone asked you what God desires first and foremost from people, especially when it comes to their relationship with Him, what would be your answer? Some of you would probably answer in the words of Deuteronomy 6:4: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*" You'd be absolutely right.

If I could make the questions a little more personal, I might ask if you love God. That could be a bit more difficult. You'd think about it and say, "*Deep down inside, I do love God.*" On the surface, there's little to prove you wrong. Your love for God is an intensely personal thing known only to him and to you.

What if I were to ask you a third question: *Do you love your neighbor?* That could be the most difficult of all. You might want clarity of who I am referring to as being my neighbor? Are you referring to those who live on my street, my subdivision? Perhaps you are referring to those who live in Cartersville, or Bartow County? Why draw a line around the county? Why not take in the people in our state of Georgia? In fact, you can take in 300,000,000 people in the United States." You might say you're not sure how to answer the question. You don't know who your neighbor is.

That same conversation comes to us out of the pages of Scripture. In the tenth chapter of Luke, a young lawyer, a theologian, comes to question Jesus. He isn't really interested in what Jesus has to say. He wants to demonstrate his great intellect on the stage of debate. "*Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?*"

I admire Jesus' restraint. Jesus doesn't say to him, *"That's a dumb question. The nature of an inheritance is that you do nothing for it. Someone gives it to you. They die, and all you have to do is receive it."* But Jesus didn't say that. Jesus said, *"You're a lawyer. You know the Old Testament law. What do you think it teaches?"* I think this man was deeply discouraged with Jesus' response. He had come hoping for theological dialogue, and Jesus was treating him like Dick and Jane in my first reading books, "Run, Jane run." Just about anyone who grew up in the midst of the people of God knew the answer to that question, and he blurted out the reply, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself."* Jesus said, *"That's a good answer. You keep doing that, and you'll live."*

Seeking to justify himself, the lawyer said, *"Who is my neighbor?"* When Jesus answers the question, he doesn't give a long theological discourse on the question. He just tells a story. It is from that familiar story, Jesus gives the answer to the question: Who is my neighbor? But it's important to realize that in answering the question Jesus took this man out of his world of theory and theology and took him into another world: a world known to ambulance drivers and police officers and people who work in the emergency rooms of hospitals. In that world, he found the answer to the question, *"Who is my neighbor?"* If the man broken, beat up and robbed could mumble a reply, his answer would be as wide as the world: "Just about anybody coming down the road who's willing to stop and lend a hand would qualify completely."

During my first two years of seminary I was the proud owner of what was called an MG Midget, a tiny little sports car convertible that was

just a little bigger than a go cart. I was driving to North Augusta on I-20 when suddenly the engine died. I pulled over. I tried for about 10 minutes to get it re-started. Nothing. Back then there were no cell phones. I was about 70 miles from Atlanta on I-20, and back then, there was nothing from Covington to Atlanta. Nothing but trees. There was nothing left to do at that point but pray and I simply told God I had a big need that I needed for Him to meet and the moment I prayed that I heard the screeching of tires, the smell of burnt rubber as an old dump truck with a missing hood on the engine came to a screeching halt about 100 feet in front of my car. Out stepped a huge rough looking fellow and he asked, "Can I give you a lift?" Now that rough looking fellow took me all the way to my house and dropped me off in front of the driveway of my parent's home. I would quickly say that this man and I became neighbors.

That's the way it is, isn't it? You and I are driving down the road, and our car makes strange noises and comes rolling to a stop. We don't have the tools or the skill to fix the thing. Just about anybody coming down the road, who's willing to stop and lend a hand, qualifies completely as a neighbor.

The spotlight in this parable is not on the Priest or the Levite that came down the road. The spotlight is on the third man down the road. He was a Samaritan. If the priest and the Levite were at the top of the list of candidates for a neighbor, then the Samaritan was at the bottom of the list. The Jews and the Samaritans hated each other with a deep, long-standing hatred. Whenever a Jew talked about a Samaritan, he called him a dog. When this Samaritan came down the road, he saw the wounded man, was filled with pity, and got down on the side of the dirt road to cleanse and bandage the wounds. He put the man on his donkey, brought him to the hotel, sat up with him through the

night, paid the room rent, and promised to pay for anything else that was needed.

When Jesus was through with the story, he asked, "*Which of these three do you think was neighbor to this man who was beaten up by thieves: the two who knew the theology or the one who stopped to help?*" The lawyer, not willing to take the name Samaritan on his lips, said, "*I guess the one who showed mercy.*" Jesus said, "*Go. Keep on doing likewise.*"

In that story is the answer to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" The answer is as simple as it is deep: Your neighbor is anyone whose need you see and whose need you're in a position to meet. It's as simple as that. Your neighbor may be someone who is unknown. There's no evidence that this Jew and Samaritan ever met each other before just like I had never met the fellow that pulled over in his truck that day on 1-20. One of the marks of the love of Jesus Christ and his people is that they have gone to other cultures and other countries to reach people they did not know but whose needs they knew. Your neighbor may be unfriendly. The Jews and the Samaritans were deep and longstanding enemies. You may find your neighbor as somebody who rubs you raw, doesn't appreciate you, and slams the door when you try to visit. Your neighbor may be unlovely.

There's nothing attractive about a man lying by the side of a dirt road broken and beaten up. You may have a neighbor whose lifestyle you don't approve, whose hairstyle you don't like, and whose whole way of operating is a complete turnoff. Your neighbor may be unrewarding. There's no evidence that that Jew was ever able to pay the Samaritan back for what he'd done. Sometimes in our churches we reach out to people not to help them but because of how they can help us. Statistics are a bit low, or the budget's a bit heavy so we need to get some more

folks to make the operation look good. Jesus is saying your neighbor is anyone whose need God has put you in a position to meet.

Buried in the story there is some indication of what it might take to be a neighbor: willingness to be involved, to lend a hand, and to give time. Like most of you, I live a hectic, hurried, and somewhat harassed life. The hardest thing to give to people is time. You have to stop and get involved. It costs money. This Samaritan laid out two silver coins, two denarii. One denarius was equal to one day's wage for a manual laborer. He put two of them on the counter and then became security for anything else that was left. He gave his money. He gave his time. He got involved.

There's a hook in that little phrase your neighbor is anyone whose need you see. All three of these men saw a stranger who had been robbed. But in a sense they really didn't see the same thing. The priest may have seen a ceremonial defilement. The Levite may have seen a talking point for dialogue. Only the Samaritan saw his neighbor. Buried beneath this story is a deeper truth: What I am on the inside determines what I see on the outside. That's a principle of life.

You and I go to an art museum. I love art. I am not one of those who rushes through art galleries. I like to take my time. I like to take in the detail, the story and meaning in the painting. Yet that is not true of all the paintings that might exist in the gallery. I am drawn to certain types of paintings. I am drawn to certain types of scenery. Whereas you may be drawn to other types of art and other types of stories in the paintings. You may want to rush through the section I am in because what I am absorbed in may not interest you. The difference isn't what's hanging up on the wall. The difference is what's here inside. What you are determines what you want to see. Christian love

does not necessarily reside in the personality being loved. It begins in the person doing the loving.

I realized that it is not such a simple thing to love God. By nature the heart is a rebel and men and women no more search for a God than a thief searches for a policeman. The only way I'm able to love God is that the love of God himself is literally poured into my heart through the Holy Spirit. The New Testament is saying that the same love that enables me to love the Father in heaven enables me to love my brother and my neighbor on earth. What you are determines what you see, and what you see will determine what you do. That's just a fact of life.

When I was a child my mom would read to me poems before going to bed. It would be later in life, when I had my two children, Barrett and Catherine that I would read some of those same poems out of the same book that she read to me. One night I was reading to Barrett and Catherine these familiar words;

Pussycat, Pussycat, where have you been?
I've been to London to see the queen.
Pussycat, Pussycat, what saw you there?
I saw a wee mouse under her chair.

I noticed on Barrett's face that he had a perplexed look on his face and he is by nature a processor of everything so I asked him, "Barrett what are you thinking right now? He said, "That is sad poem." I said, "Why is it sad?" He said, "I feel sad that the pussy cat missed the queen because all he wanted was a mouse." Out of the mouths of babes God speaks. When you have the heart of a cat, mice are infinitely more important than queens.

As we have seen over the past three weeks, you mean everything to God. As the psalmist said, "His love for you is higher than the heavens are above the earth." He values you. He cares for you. You are His pride and joy! That is the vertical relationship and that is of highest priority. So what do you do in response to the amazing love shown to us in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? Do you spend your days in the quietness of your home, with the door shut to the world telling Him over and over how much you love Him? Is that what God desires in our response to His love for us?

Once the vertical relationship has been established, the horizontal relationship between you and me takes prominence as well. The Apostle John was there when Jesus told this parable. He knew it by heart. I can't help but believe that this parable was in the heart and mind of John as he wrote these words in His letter called I John; *"See what great love God has lavished upon us, that we should be called Children of God. Dear friends, since God loved us, we surely ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another God lives in us and His love is made complete in us. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth."* It is not so much about how much I tell God that I love Him who I've not seen. No, it is much more about loving my neighbor whose needs I can see. And who is my neighbor? My neighbor is anyone whose need I see and whose need God has put me in a position to meet. It's as simple and as difficult as that.