

Sunday, July 13, 2025

Luke 10: 25-37

A Better Neighbor

If you pay any attention to the news today, it's hard not to feel that we, a collective "we," aren't doing a very good job of taking care of one another. The comments section below most headlines, even seemingly innocuous ones, are filled with vitriol and hate towards anyone deemed an "other," whether that includes a political, racial, religious, or any other divisive boundary we've set for ourselves in this current societal climate. Just this week, two motorists inexplicably shot each other on I-65 in Alabaster in a suspected road rage incident. Put simply, we just aren't being very good neighbors. It's tough to read and watch these developments day-in and day-out and not fight an urge to become disillusioned by it all. At no time in this world after the fall of man has there ever been a period, I don't think, of overwhelming peace and goodwill among the nations, but it does seem like the advent of the digital age and social media has ushered in an acute awareness of just how mean we can be to each other. Gone are the days of newspaper editorials and pronouncements in town squares to get a point across. Hidden behind blue screens and private profiles, this new era of the same old, cold world emboldens and rewards the worst traits in us all. Despite all of this, the question at the heart of today's Gospel reading seeks to offer us an offramp from the fear and anxiety we may feel for what happens if we don't course correct from our current trajectory, and offers us an alternative vision instead: How can we be a better neighbor?

Today's reading takes place in the thick of what is often referred to as Luke's "travel narrative." This narrative, beginning in Chapter 9 and continuing on until Chapter 19, depicts Jesus and his journey from Galilee through Samaria and Jericho, culminating in his triumphant arrival in Jerusalem, with all the twists and turns and miracles and parables in between. It's no surprise, then, that the backdrop for this morning's parable is set along a journey from Jerusalem to Jericho. Jesus finds himself tested by what the text refers to as a lawyer, but in first century context would have been a scholar of the Torah, or the law governing Jewish life at the time. The lawyer begins by asking Jesus a seemingly universal question any religious person might ask of their teacher: "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus, knowing the scholar already knows the textual answer to his question, replies, "what is written in the law?" The lawyer rightly answers Jesus with what even Christians today know to be the two greatest commandments of our faith in God: "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.” But the lawyer, in his own self-righteousness, was left unsatisfied with simply reciting the law back to Jesus. Wanting to draw lines in the sand over who qualifies for Godly love, he goads Jesus further. Just who, precisely, is my neighbor, he asks. The answer he gets is what famously became what we know now as the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus thus tells a story of a man on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. This journey itself is notable for the fact that the historical record suggests that most Jews would have taken this route, the long way around, per se, as a means to avoid Samaria, and likewise Samaritans, altogether. That a Samaritan would become the protagonist of the story is a reversal that the lawyer most likely would not expect, and certainly not want to hear. The man traveling along this road is beaten, robbed, and left for dead in a ditch. A priest and a Levite, both highly religious figures at that time, pass by separately on the other side of the road, ignoring the man and his needs completely. It’s the Samaritan man, a sworn enemy of the Jews, that subsequently lends aid to the stricken man after being overcome with compassion for him. He uses his own oil and wine, expensive staples back then, to tend to his wounds. He pays the equivalent of two days’ wages to get him settled in an inn and on the road to recovery. These details illustrate not just that the Samaritan pitied the man, but showered him with lavish goods to see that he would heal completely. Though these two men came from two different groups, two different walks of life, the Samaritan never once stopped to see if the other man was worthy of his help. He never considered whether the man passed some societal test before rendering aid. He went above and beyond simply seeing that the man was attended to. And it was love – whole, Godly love – that led him to do it.

To understand the acrimony felt between the Jews and Samaritans of Jesus’ time, you’d have to go back almost a thousand years. To reference our Old Testament passage today from the Book of Amos, Jeroboam, that fateful king of Israel from all those years ago, was so overcome with sin that his actions led to the Israelites being exiled from their land to Babylon. Over time, the remnant few Israelites in that land intermarried with foreign settlers and became known as Samaritans. Though they kept some customs of the ancient Israelites, the resulting religion and culture was so divorced from old Jewish tradition that it was viewed as something else entirely. By the time the Jews ultimately returned from exile, they felt nothing but disdain for the Samaritans. They saw the Samaritans as evil fruit of the “sins of Jeroboam,” to quote passages from 1 and 2 Kings. If they had never been exiled, the Samaritans probably wouldn’t even exist. Jews believed that Samaritans had poisoned their bloodline and defiled their land. They saw them as idolaters and apostates. In the Gospel reading from a couple weeks ago, we even see Jesus’s disciples James and John ask if they

should have God “command fire to come down from heaven and consume” an entire village of Samaritans because they would not host Jesus. A little extreme, I know, and Jesus rightfully rebuked them for it. But it hammers home just how much these two communities reviled each other. The lawyer from this parable, therefore, would have wanted Jesus to reinforce his worldview that Samaritans, or anyone else deemed an “other,” for that matter, were excluded from who qualifies as a neighbor. It’s a theme repeated throughout history, time and time again, but it’s important context if we want to appreciate just how shocked the lawyer, and most other Jews in Jesus’ time, would have been to see the Samaritan as the ultimate hero of this story, and above all else an example of how to live if we are to inherit eternal life.

In a modern context, as self-professed Christians in the 21st Century, we probably like to read this parable and imagine ourselves as the Samaritan in the story. After all, our two greatest commandments are to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. But the longer I sit with this parable and really contemplate the application of it to our lives today, it’s hard not to reckon with the belief that more often than not, we embody the actions of the priest and Levite when confronted with a proverbial traveler in need. Even though we may not represent the extreme examples I set out at the beginning of this sermon, a lot of us, and I include myself here, are still guilty of ignoring the cries for help we hear from the margins of society and from the ditch on the side of the road. We find ourselves citizens of the richest country in the world, but are still surrounded by need that isn’t very hard to find if we take the time to look for it. Members of our communities still face hunger today, exemplified by institutions and programs like area food banks and Ascension’s own backpack program that serves underprivileged children at several elementary schools, right here in Vestavia Hills. How often do we see someone in need and think to ourselves, “surely someone else will come along and offer to help.” Oftentimes this dereliction of our Christian duty might even be subconscious. At times we can be so distracted by this overly connected and busy new world we live in that we don’t see or even acknowledge the suffering of those around us. But if we really believe that God is still in control of a seemingly spiraling world, then hope it not yet lost. Not in the slightest. So, if we want to play a bigger role in trying our hardest to realize Christ’s kingdom here on earth, the question still remains: How can we be a better neighbor?

Luckily, you don’t have to go far to find examples of ways to better serve your community. Starting right here at Church of the Ascension, we have a variety of ministries that offer opportunities to help those in need. Whether that be the aforementioned backpack program we provide for elementary-aged students, or serving meals at First Light shelter for women and

children, we are always looking for more volunteers to serve with our outreach ministries here. The one most near and dear to my heart, The Abbey breakfast ministry, packs and serves breakfast and lunch to the disadvantaged and homeless community in Avondale every Wednesday evening and Thursday morning. You'll get to meet real characters like Mike, or Tom, or Hank. Folks who don't have much other than the clothes on their backs and belongings in a sack, but still gather with others to see that everyone is fed and taken care of. I invite you all to take part in our upcoming Ministry Fair taking place on Sunday, August 10th, to learn more about all the offerings we have here at Ascension, and to prayerfully consider signing up for what speaks to your heart the most. And if you still feel unsure of how you can best serve this parish and the world, we also offer a volunteer accelerator quiz that compiles your answers to a series of questions and returns a list of spiritual gifts and associated ministries that align best with those answers. If you haven't taken it yet, or simply want a refresher, ask me or anyone in leadership here at the church and we will be happy to send it to you. But the opportunities don't stop here inside the walls of this church or at the boundaries of our various cities and suburbs. Despite the example set out in today's Gospel, the lesson doesn't end at helping only our neighbors with a real or perceived difference from us. Our neighbors, at the root, are anyone we encounter in need along our various and scattered roads. A neighborly example can be as simple as helping an older woman collect change she drops at a grocery store register, or as extreme as stopping at an accident and rendering aid. But being a better neighbor is also acknowledging that we cannot go it alone.

Answering the question at the heart of the parable of the Good Samaritan forces us to not only place ourselves in the shoes of the Samaritan traveler, but also in those of the man left for dead in the ditch. Only until we see ourselves as those in need, just as much as those there to help, can we fully experience the compassion and care it takes to set a Christlike example for others. Only until we experience what it feels like to be forsaken, forgotten, can we know just how much a cry from the margins needs our attention. And being a better neighbor relies just as much on God's help as it does each other's. Examples of this are rife throughout scripture, but we find them even in the ordinary words we read and sing today. Our epistle reading from Colossians today implores us to "lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God." That fruit might just look like being a better neighbor to those who need it most. Verse 3 of our closing hymn today, the classic Praise to the Lord, the Almighty (one of my all-time favorites, I might add), asks us to "ponder anew what the Almighty can do, who with his love doth befriend thee." It's this love of God, from God, and our acceptance of it, that allows us to

be better neighbors and to offer it to all others we encounter. And though I may sound like a State Farm salesman with all this talk of “good neighbors,” the insurance I wish for all of us isn’t an earthly kind in the slightest. Our ultimate calling as Christians commands us to strike down the barriers and boundaries we draw for ourselves in the name of earthly power and to instead embrace the fruit of the Spirit that discriminates against no one. After all, on the day that we finally gather around God’s table in Glory, we won’t be labeled by the color of our skin or the creed of our tribe. We won’t be viewed as anything other than Beloved in Christ. As those that answered the call, and ultimately said yes. Our Baptismal Covenant, the vow we take and reaffirm on a regular basis, asks plainly of us: “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” I will, but only with God’s help. Amen.