



# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *“When Empire Robs Us”*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Stephanie Hawley  
March 30, 2025

### **Scripture Readings:** *(The Inclusive Bible)*

#### **Luke 10:25-37**

*An expert on the Law stood up to put Jesus to the test and said, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit everlasting life?” Jesus answered, “What is written in the law? How do you read it?” The expert on the Law replied: “You must love the Most High God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus said, “You have answered correctly. Do this and you’ll live.” But the expert on the Law, seeking self-justification, pressed Jesus further: “And just who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “There was a traveler going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, who fell prey to robbers.”*

*“The traveler was beaten, stripped naked, and left half-dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road; the priest saw the traveler lying beside the road, but passed by on the other side. Likewise there was a Levite who came the same way; this one, too, saw the afflicted traveler and passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, who was taking the same road, also came upon the traveler and, filled with compassion, approached the traveler and dressed the wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then the Samaritan put the wounded person on a donkey, went straight to an inn and there took care of the injured one.”*

*“The next day the Samaritan took out two silver pieces and gave them to the innkeeper with the request, ‘Look after this person, and if there is any further expense, I’ll repay you on the way back.’ Which of these three, in your opinion, was the neighbor to the traveler who fell in with the robbers?” The answer came, “The one who showed compassion.” Jesus replied, “Then go and do the same.”*

#### **Matthew 11:25-30**

*Then Jesus prayed, “God, Creator of heaven and earth, to you I offer praise; for what you have hidden from the learned and the clever, you have revealed to the youngest children. Yes, God, everything is as you want it to be.” Jesus continued, “Everything has been handed over to me by God. No one knows the Only Begotten except God, and no one knows God except the Only Begotten — and those to whom the Only Begotten wants to give that revelation. Come to me, all you who labor and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. Here you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

# Sermon

Babs Miller:

When I hear Dr. Stephanie Hawley, I realize I should say something because I just think of her as Stephanie, an old friend who comes here periodically and shares her wisdom with us. She's recently retired from Austin Independent School District, where she headed up the DEI (*laughter*) office there. But they were very wise and gave it a different name, so it was harder to discover. We are grateful that she's willing to share her words with us, and she'll be back again next month at the end of the month. We look forward to that also. So welcome, Dr. Hawley.

Dr. Hawley:

Good morning, Saint Andrew's! Grateful to be back here with you. This morning, we have an opportunity, as Babs said, I officially retired from the school district on Friday. I don't call it retirement; I call it soul realignment. (*laughter*) This is my first act of soul realignment after retirement. It's just always great to be in this space with you.

Today, I want to be a little vulnerable because I've been wrestling with something during these political times. Actually, and I shared with Babs earlier, I had a whole sermon I wanted to preach on something totally different, but the spirit kept coming to me to go to this topic. Today, I want us to spend a little time going through one of the first Sunday school lessons I can remember, which is that of the Good Samaritan. I was very small when I learned this, and it's one of Jesus's most well-known parables. We've got hospitals, organizations, and awards all over the world; people know the term *Good Samaritan*. When somebody says someone's a Good Samaritan, we know that we're dealing with somebody who's kind, someone who really strives to work with people who are down on their luck, and they don't expect any kind of repayment. A Good Samaritan is not transactional, but they give from the heart and from the spirit.

I've been struggling with the fact – I'm asking the question; *What does it mean to be a good neighbor in 2025 amidst all of the chaos?* Daily, we have new chaos. What does it mean? And who is my neighbor? And who am I a neighbor to? As a kid, again, it was all about the compassion of this story and how to be kind. But as I grew older and I've revisited this text many, many times, I came to understand why was Jesus telling this story to begin with? It was because he was challenged by the traditional ... I'm just going to say, fundamentalists, who wanted to make sure that they could get some justification for perhaps excluding someone from being a neighbor. Jesus really, being the consummate teacher that he was, he knew that the best way to teach anybody is to tell a story, not to get into a big argument, not to prove and bring evidence, but just tell a story. This is the story he told. Jesus knew, again, like a great teacher, knew his audience very well.

He knew his listeners knew that Samaritans and Jewish people did not get along. This was oil and water, totally oil and water. They had different ways of worshiping, different ways of being. There was nothing that they were on the same page about. As Jesus is telling this story, he knows that his audience is very well aware that a priest is considered to be one of the most outwardly, publicly, holy people. In this story, he shares that the priest is the one that crosses the street and

looks the other way. Then the Levite, who is also a religious person, and has a different role in the church, in the temple, as an administrator and as a judge. If anybody was going to show compassion, the Levite surely would. But as Jesus tells this parable, he crosses the street, looks the other way. The least likely person that should respond to someone who's been robbed, who's naked – not half naked, naked – half dead, was the one who did. When I went back and I looked at pictures, even modern-day pictures of the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, that's a desolate road. There's *no way* that those two religious men did not see this man who was on the road.

In this day and age, how do we repeat – how do we do what we're instructed to do as Good Samaritans? I want you to look through a 2025 lens with me at what this scene might require. We might see the traveler, the victim, the person that was robbed as the many marginalized groups who have been robbed by empire. Between the federal government, the state government, the local government, there are a lot of people on the road. Many of you in this room belong to groups that have been stripped and are left on the road. The cruelty that we see leaves people stripped. We see where immigrants are deported, women's rights are stolen, college students are just spirited away, kidnapped, in this country. Trans people are being persecuted, and people are trying to erase trans people. Medicine is withheld from poor people. We see this on the news every day. There's so many religious leaders and leaders, period, that are crossing the street in 2025. They're crossing the street, and they're allowing all of this to happen uninterrupted and looking the other way. The second man, the Levite, could be some of our judges and our representatives who are aligned with empire.

They cross the street by interpreting the laws in favor of the people with power. They allow the powerful to threaten and punish the weak. And we see this on a daily basis. And then they fail to show up for town hall meetings. I don't know if any of you all have been to those town hall meetings, or at least seen on TV. These are the Levites of our day, and they allow robbery and abuse in broad daylight. So I want to say to you, hopefully, we are the Samaritans. I'd like to think we're the Samaritans because there are so many opportunities for us to be good Samaritans. Right now, Native Americans, particularly the Osage Nation, are protesting because funding and support has been stripped. We've got people with disabilities of all ages – funding, support, offices are being torn down. We, the Samaritans, are witnessing this daily. People are experiencing homelessness. The funding and the support, the little that there was, is being stripped away. And families who are dependent on social services, health services, stripped. So part of the challenge for us, at least for me, is there is so much going on.

If you get on your social media, in less than five minutes, you can see disasters from around the globe, from the Sudan, from Palestine. You can see Thailand had a terrible earthquake this week. You can see disasters, you can see genocide, and we can become numb, and we can feel powerless. We can actually get overwhelmed, and we can shut down, and we can actually be one of those people who can see people on the road, feel like we can't do anything, and continue our journey.

So, psychologists tell us that humans were never, ever designed – we do not have the psychic capacity to take on disasters from around the world. We can barely take on disasters within our kinesphere, even within just our church and our city. And so here we are with all of this

information, with all of these images. It's often said, cruelty is the point. Sometimes we are afraid to address things because we may get swept up in things, or we feel like what we are going to do, or my protest or my blog or whatever it is you choose to do is not going to make a difference. One of my big questions that I'm wrestling with is, how on earth can I be a Good Samaritan, be the neighbor that Jesus called me to be in the midst of it all.

So, I started studying the Samaritan, even though I have to tell y'all, it seems like his job was pretty easy. One dude on the road, wine, oil, get him to an inn. Good. Two pieces of silver, which was a big deal back then, right? He was done. In our age, there is so much. So how do we focus? How do we figure out? Think about the prayer that we shared earlier. How do we figure out what is ours to do? Because we know that if we say we follow Christ, and we're connected with spirit, we cannot do nothing. We can't look the other direction. And so, as I studied the Samaritan, he appeared to be very spiritually connected. And that comes from being in solitude. And many of us probably have a practice of being in solitude in the morning, midday, the evening, sometimes before the rest of the family gets up, we can sit out in nature, and we can get connected. The solitude is so crucial for us because that's where our spiritual connection comes from. And I often say that spending time in solitude and stillness is putting my mask on first, because I don't know what the day is going to bring, but I do know being connected to spirit allows me to see what it is that is mine to do.

I can also carry that stillness with me, so I can be in the storm, but I still have that connection with spirit. Even though Jesus doesn't tell us, specifically, that this Samaritan had prayed or had been meditating, it's very clear that he was connected to spirit. It was clear because he didn't hesitate. There's no hesitation in the scripture. Now, Jesus could have given us an interior dialogue. We didn't get that dialogue. The dialogue, for some of us, might have been, *"I don't like these people. They don't like me. I wonder what he did to get stripped and naked. Oh, well."* So none of this dialogue, no hesitation. That's how we know when people are really being guided by spirit. He doesn't cross the street. He gets out the things that need to be done. He does what his work is to do. So that's one point I've learned from the Samaritan. Be spiritually connected.

I also want to share a story. A friend of mine recently sent me video. She texted me this video. I couldn't make sense of it. I could see a family, and it was an African American family, surrounded by dogs and police off of I-35, not even five miles from here. I'm not understanding what I'm seeing. I see something, but I don't – so she begins to text me and tells me where she is. She was going down the road, and as she was going down the road, she saw the mother standing on some part of her car, waving, trying to get people to stop. And she has a baby, and she has small children, and her husband is being dealt with by the police and the family is surrounded by dogs and police. My friend said something in her body would not allow her to continue down the road. So she and her husband turned around, and she went back to videotape what was happening. She said that you could tell they had just come out of church. Everybody was very dressed up. The children were petrified, and they were surrounded. And the police tried to ward her and her husband off and tried to tell them this is a police matter, but they persisted, and she persisted. And the police realized that they weren't going to go away. And they drug everything out of the car, tested some things, and eventually, while she's still filming, the police are watching her, very consciously. And when you see the videotape, you see them looking, because they realize somebody's bearing witness. Somebody's bearing witness. And that's what it looks

like in some ways, in many ways, to be the Good Samaritan in 2025. What does it mean, in your world, to be a Good Samaritan when you see somebody up against empire or up against force? We have a lot of opportunities.

So, one of the other things I noticed about the Samaritan is that good neighbors are in solidarity. So not just solitude, but you've got to be in solidarity. That is a commitment to the afflicted, to be with people. And the commitment the Samaritan showed, not only just the investment of money to the inn keeper, but spending time. So obviously, and Jesus doesn't tell us where the Samaritan was headed, what his business was. Just know he's from Jerusalem to Jericho, but he takes this time to do what he can, and he invests. And whenever we're in solidarity with people, it is far beyond just allyship. It means we stick and stay with people until we know that they're going to be okay. And so this idea of solidarity is something that we see here at St. Andrew's.

We saw that with the cold weather shelters and folks experiencing homelessness and turning the sanctuary into the space that is necessary. And then I just learned earlier, just a few minutes ago, about St Andrew's sharing the sanctuary with Palestinian neighbors for a conversation that they needed to have a few weeks ago. That's what solidarity looks like. One of the things I love about this church is not only are there signs outside. So if someone never came into St. Andrew's, there are signs that tell you this church, *"Love thy neighbor. No exception."* I haven't found that sign anywhere in front of a church. I'm sure there's somewhere. But this church – and then when you come in here, you feel that. My friends and newcomers to Austin who are of the LGBTQ community, I tell them this is the space where their humanity is honored. That's what solidarity looks like. So some people say, and there are some churches that put up some signs that are performative. You're performing and saying, this is what we're about. And then when you get in, you're, uhhh, I don't know. False advertisement out here. Right? (*laughter*) Here, it is felt. It is felt.

One of the other things I learned from the Samaritan as I watched him closely, was how crucial it is to be sanctuary. And sanctuary is like the space we're in. We usually think of it as physical spaces, and it is. But sanctuary is also something that we are. So if we are vessels of spirit or we are followers of Jesus, we're sanctuary. So in your workplace, when somebody is being treated poorly and you make space to listen without judgment, you are sanctuary. When you're talking to someone who's unhoused, experiencing homelessness, whether they come here for a shelter, you listen to their story without judgment. Sanctuary is a safe space. It's a safe space, and we can all be sanctuary in these times. So whomever we encounter who's marginalized, who's on the edge, we can be that. We can be that for them.

So I want you to think a little bit about this whole idea of yourself as a Samaritan, because I'm putting my burden on you all this morning. I'm thinking about, how do I love my neighbor with no exceptions? How am I sanctuary? Earlier this month, we had just an extraordinary example of what people in power can do. We had a bunch of mayors, from what were considered sanctuary cities, were brought in by an House Oversight Committee, and they were grilled mercilessly. I've encouraged people to look at the tape. It is unbelievable. You almost think you're not in the United States. The questions that these mayors are asked, why are you harboring immigrants, criminals? All of these mayors stood up to these committees, to this oversight committee. One man in particular from Denver seemed to be a target. As you watch, they threatened him with

jail. For what he did to support immigrants. And so since 2022, Denver has been flooded with immigrants who were sent from Texas, by the Texas governor. So charter buses are coming into Denver. The city is overwhelmed, but they never put people on buses and send them away. They start to integrate them in. They start to build the capacity of the city, and they invest more than \$79 million over less than three years to ensure that people are taking care of these immigrants that are sent to them. This is very unusual for people in power to do.

And so he was grilled. He was asked why he was engaged in all of this. And the mayor was asked specifically why he provided sanctuary to criminals. And he said,

*“As a man of faith, I have a moral obligation to care for those in need. So that’s what we did. In Denver, we believe our problems are solvable, and we are the ones to solve them, so we went to work.”*

That’s a modern-day Samaritan. And I tell everybody, I didn’t look for any more information about this mayor because I want to keep him in a good space in my head. *(laughter)* I don’t know what else he’s done. But if he never does anything else, this will have been enough. This is a man that’s connected to his faith. He’s in solidarity, and he has created – he says not a sanctuary, but a welcoming city. It’s a welcoming city. His name is Mike Johnston, and I tell everybody there’s a ‘T’ there, so don’t confuse him with the other person. But if you get a chance, you can actually see what it looks like to have the courage of your convictions, and what it looks like to be a Samaritan who has power.

Most of us don’t have the power, right? We don’t have the same power that Johnston has. We don’t have the oversight over so many resources, but we do have the ability to connect in our solitude. We do have the ability to be in solidarity. We do have the ability to be sanctuary.

So as I close, I want to bring your attention to two vulnerable groups that we haven’t mentioned, and many of us fall into this category, I’m just guessing, looking out at the audience. Senior citizens. They say 55 plus. I’ve told Babs, I think those numbers need to be changed. But Senior Citizens 55, AARP, and all of that. And veterans, those are two very vulnerable groups right now. They’ve been stripped, and more threats are coming. It made me sad to think about what we’re doing to those two groups. Then I read a disturbing report. Well, several disturbing reports and articles. That the majority of senior citizens who voted, voted for the current administration, the administration that is currently stripping – I’m just going to say stripping us. Then I read where the majority of veterans who voted, voted for this administration. High numbers of folks in both these groups, at one at point, called themselves MAGA, Proud MAGA.

There are some people that adhere to this political ideology in the way some people adhere to religion, and others are starting to wake up, to realize they are stripped on the side of the road. But still, there are some that hang on to the ideology. I’m very curious about what that means for me, and for us, and people who want to be good neighbors and Good Samaritans, right? People who want to follow Jesus. In the second scripture, we talked about Jesus says, *“Take my yoke upon you.”* Following Jesus is how we get these things done. So I’m struggling.

The last question I have – and I'm exploring, and I want to leave with you to reflect on.

*Am I MAGA's neighbor? If I am not MAGA's neighbor, then who am I?*

*Am I the priest?*

*Am I the Levite?*

*Or am I the traveler who's been robbed of my empathy by empire?*

I leave you to reflect on the three questions I wrestle with. Thank you. (*applause*)

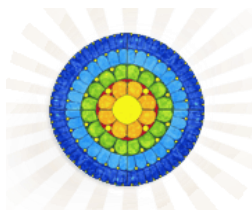
## Benediction

Rev. Erica Knisely

We are so thankful to Dr. Stephanie Hawley for her sermon this morning, and glad that you will be back soon.

Friends, seek solitude and peace. Connect with your source that is love. Choose solidarity with and to the afflicted. Invest in justice with your very lives. Be sanctuary for the hunted, the hounded, and the hated. Go from this place in peace. I love thy neighbor, no exceptions. Amen.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*



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