

Who is my neighbor?  
Craig Atwood, HMC 7-13-2025  
Luke 10:25-37

An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 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 neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 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."

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

## **Introduction**

Do you remember Mr. Roger's Neighborhood? I realize many of you, like me, grew up in the era before public broadcasting, and some of you were born in this century, but you may have watched Mr Rogers with your children or grandchildren. My nephews and nieces used to stay at my parents' house a lot when they were little, and my father would let them watch the only television in the house if he approved of the shows. Mr. Rogers made the list. We noticed, though, that my dad was almost always home when Mr. Rogers was on. And then my mom noticed that in his retirement he was watching Mr. Rogers when the children weren't there.

Fred Rogers was a remarkable man who broke down the barriers of society by speaking to the child in each of us. He understood the joys and fears of childhood. He addressed some very important issues, such as racism and grief, gently because he knows how easily frightened children can be. Adults are easily frightened, too. Back in the 1990s, Moravian College gave Fred Rogers the Comenius Medallion because he embodied so many of the principles of Bishop Comenius, and his acceptance speech was about the need for all of us to see each other as neighbors.

I'm sure if I could sign the theme song, most of you could join with me. It is a beautiful day in the neighborhood. A journalist once did a profile about Mr. Rogers titled *Won't You Be My Neighbor*. He was with Fred one day riding the subway in Manhattan rather than using a taxi, because Fred didn't like to waste money. The subway looked a bit like the Biblical story of Pentecost with people of many different races, countries, and languages crowded into the car. Most of them were adult New Yorkers who had learned the rule that you never acknowledge someone's presence on the subway. Look down. Look away. Read. Listen to your audio book. Sleep. Ignore everyone. But then someone recognized Fred and began to sing his song. Within seconds everyone in the car joined the singing. *Won't you be my neighbor?* The journalist said that some of his cynicism washed away on the smiles of the people on the subway.

## **Transition**

Our gospel lesson for this morning is about neighbors and love of neighbors, which is what brought Mr. Rogers to mind. The Good Samaritan is one of the most familiar parables Jesus ever told. People who have never attended church or read the Bible know what a good Samaritan is – someone who helps a stranger in need. When you hear names like Samaritan Inn, Samaritan ministries for the homeless, Samaritan's purse, you know those organizations are focused on caring for people in need. Many states have "Good Samaritan" laws to protect people who try to be helpful in an emergency from liability if something goes wrong. Like a good neighbor, a good Samaritan is there. But let's not let the fact that this parable is familiar keep us looking more deeply into it.

## **The Parable in Luke**

This is one of a few parables of Jesus found only in the Gospel of Luke. You may remember that Matthew and Mark give us the story of Jesus and a rich young man

asking about which commandment is the greatest, but it is only in Luke's gospel that Jesus answers that question with a parable. It is interesting that Jesus often answered questions about theology and ethics with a story instead of giving a straight answer. He did this so that people would be forced to think about the answer themselves.

In today's story, an expert in the law came up to Jesus to **test** him with a question. This is different from the stories in Matthew and Mark where the rich young man appears to be seeking enlightenment. The expert was asking a question he already knew the answer to. Luke says that he was testing Jesus, which tells us right off the bat that the expert was not looking for truth or to establish a relationship with Jesus. He was setting a trap for Jesus to prove that he was an ignorant Galilean who had no right presenting himself as a rabbi. Having been a professor and pastor for many years, I have had many people ask me this kind of testing question. They are not wanting to learn; they either want to prove that they know more than the professor or prove that professor is a heretic. In politics these are called gotcha questions.

But, as usual, Jesus refuses to indulge the expert's attempt to justify himself. Jesus turns the question around so the expert can demonstrate his mastery of the law. "You tell me what is written in the law," Jesus says, and the expert gives a precise and accurate reply. As good as AI. He quotes a passage from Deuteronomy that pious Jews to this day repeat daily. It is called the Shema: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One and you shall love the Lord our God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." The version in Luke is just a little different in that it includes loving God with all your mind, but that's a sermon for another day.

### **Love of neighbor**

Then the expert in the law adds a twist by including a passage from Leviticus that commands people to love their neighbors as much as they love themselves. In the other gospels, it is Jesus who adds this verse, but here it is an expert in the law who speaks. And Jesus tells him he answered wisely. He got an A+ on the final exam. He really knows the law and can go home tell his parents what a good boy he is.

But then Jesus adds a twist. A simple command: do this. Do this. We do not inherit eternal life by memorizing the answers to cosmic questions or having the secret passcode to unlock the heavenly gates. **Do** this, Jesus says. I would say, "just do it," but I might get sued by Nike Corporation.

Way back in the 1400s some of our Moravian ancestors in the faith were engaged in a debate with a Catholic inquisitor. An observer noted that the Moravians did not just talk about the law like other people. They were doers of the law.

### **Who is my neighbor?**

But the expert in the law was not done. He still wanted to justify himself and prove that he was smart and righteous and better than Jesus. “Who is my neighbor?” He tried to bog Jesus down in a pointless parsing of ethical laws by determining what degree of consanguinity and proximity determines whom we should love. Earlier this year, the future pope had to correct an American politician for misunderstanding the degrees of love.

The expert wanted Jesus to define the concentric circles of love, and tell us when we can we ignore the suffering of other people. He wanted Jesus to say something like: “those who live within one hectare of our home are neighbors, but those who live elsewhere are someone else’s responsibility.”

Again, Jesus refused to take the bait. By telling a parable instead of directly answering his question, Jesus was implicitly telling the expert that he was asking the wrong question. If you need to ask who is your neighbor, you misunderstood the meaning of the Bible verses you just quoted. Instead of arguing with the man, which is what he wanted, Jesus told a story about a man traveling from Jericho to Jerusalem.

### **Samaritan**

The man could be any person. He has no name, no ethnicity, no vocation no religion state. He is, as the medieval poets said, Everyman or Everywoman. It could be one of us who was assaulted, robbed, and left for dead. The man was a victim, not because of what he had done or failed to do, but because what violent men did to him. He did not deserve what happened to him, and he needed help. The man in the parable was a victim of the world’s violence and he was close to death.

Two experts in religion happened to walk by while he was lying there bleeding. They saw him since they walked to the other side to avoid contact with him. They wanted to distance themselves from his suffering. Like the person questioning Jesus, they were expert in religious laws. They regularly offered sacrifices in the Temple and chanted Psalms praising God for his great works. They quoted the Bible and no doubt

they believed that they loved God with all their hearts and minds, since they had dedicated their lives to serving God in the Temple.

But they chose to avoid doing what the law commands, which was to love their neighbor as themselves. They crossed the road to avoid getting too close to the man who was lying there bruised and broke. Perhaps they thought he was dead or would soon be dead, and beyond helping. They may have offered prayers thanking God that this hadn't happen to them. Perhaps they knew that the man could not reward them for helping him. Since there was nothing in it for them, why should they interfere? The man was a victim and maybe God wanted him to suffer. Or, it is likely they didn't think at all. They just closed their eyes and carried on.

### **Samaritan**

And then a Samaritan came by. Up till now, the people listening to Jesus' story were probably nodding their heads and agreeing with him that priests and other elites in society are terrible people who are too selfish to help those in need. Jesus was hitting on a familiar theme of corruption and dereliction of duty. The crowd expected the hero of the story to be a poor but pious man like them who did what the professionals refused to do. But no. Jesus adds a twist. It was a Samaritan who saw the man.

The Samaritans were the descendants of the ancient tribes of Israel north of Judea who had not been taken away by the Assyrians when they conquered the kingdom of Israel. The Samaritans used the same five holy books of the law that the Jews had, the Torah, but with some significant differences. They believed that the holy mountain of the Lord was Mt Gerizim in Samaria not Zion in Jerusalem. The Samaritans were hated by the Sadducees, the Pharisees, Zealots, and just about everyone in ancient Judea. People in Judea knew there is no such thing as a *good* Samaritan. If we want to recapture the impact of this parable today, we could replace the word Samaritan with Palestinian or Haitian or Salvadoran. You can fill in the blank yourself.

The Samaritan in this story would have been called him unclean, infidel, heretic, and dog by people in Judea. But the Samaritan did what the others would not do. He stopped the bleeding. He cleaned the wounds. He put the man on his donkey. He left the man in the care of an innkeeper so he could heal. And then he went home to get more money to pay the innkeeper. Why did he do this?

## **Compassion, mercy, and neighbors**

Jesus simply says that the man had compassion. He allowed himself to be moved by the suffering of someone else, and he knew he could help. Every day in our news we hear and see powerful people mock compassion and dismiss empathy as weakness, but Jesus repeatedly places compassion at the core of the gospel. If we love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, Jesus tells us, we will be compassionate. To love God is to learn to love as God loves.

Jesus asks the expert in the law a question. Who acted as a neighbor? The expert answered wisely: it was the one who showed mercy, the compassionate one. Being a neighbor is not a matter of legal definitions, maps, politics, or social status. For the followers of Jesus, our neighborhood is not a small circle of people who live near us. Our neighbors are not just people who look like us, who worship with us, who went to school with us, and who play pickleball or golf with us. They are not just our friends and families. Our neighbors are the people we show mercy to and who show mercy to us.

## **Conclusion**

Mr. Rogers spent his career expanding the borders of his neighborhood to include every child. The song he sang each week asks a profound question: Won't you be my neighbor? Think how poignant that question is when we hear it coming from people around the world who are starving for food, starving for hope, starving for affection, starving for meaning, starving for healing, and starving for peace. Can you here them ask, won't you be my neighbor?

And Jesus said to the expert in the law and to all who wish to inherit eternal life: go and do likewise. Amen.