

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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LIKE A GOOD NEIGHBOR

Luke 10:25-37

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE READING

The parable of the Good Samaritan is undoubtedly one of the best known, if not the best known, of all the stories Jesus ever told. Unfortunately, for some of us, the story of the Good Samaritan may be so familiar that we just tune it out. We say: “Been there, heard that,” and assume there is nothing in the story or its application to life that we don’t already know. Maybe that is the case for some of you today. Maybe you *do* know the story inside and out. Maybe, unlike me, you incarnate the example of the Good Samaritan with impeccable consistency. But I’m not so sure. So I urge you to listen again to the story Jesus told – and to follow along in your Bible or one of the pew Bibles (page 735) – as I read Luke 10:25-37. Let’s give our reverent attention to the reading of God’s Word.

You may have caught the story in the news last month about the woman in Texas whose home was to be sold at a foreclosure auction. She had bought the home back in 2004. But she lost her job shortly after taking out an \$80,000 mortgage. Without a job, she quickly fell behind on her house payments. In 2006, she sold some property and used the proceeds to pay on her mortgage, but it wasn’t enough to avoid foreclosure.

She went to the auction to see what would happen to her house. While waiting for her house to come up on the auction block, a woman she had never met before sat down beside her and struck up a conversation. The stranger asked if she was there to buy a house. That is when the tears began to flow. She pointed to the description of a home in the auction brochure and said: “That’s my house.”

Within moments, her home went up for sale. She stood up and moved in closer to the crowd. Behind her, the stranger got involved in the bidding. While the foreclosed homeowner continued to cry, grieving over the loss of her home, the stranger proceeded to buy the home for about \$30,000 – and gave it back to the woman she had just met.

“All this happened within like five minutes,” said the stunned woman. “She never even asked me my name. She didn’t ask me my financial situation. She had no idea what (the house) looked like. She just did it out of the graciousness of her heart, just a ‘Good Samaritan.’ It’s amazing.”

It is amazing, isn’t it? It is not the sort of thing that happens every day. At least it is not the sort of thing we hear about happening every day.

The “Good Samaritan” acknowledged that she couldn’t afford to just give the house back to the woman, saying: “We’ll figure out however much she can pay on it. That way, she can have her house back.”

When asked why she did it, the “Good Samaritan” said: “She was just so sad. You put yourself in their situation and you realize you’ve just got to do something. If it was you, you’d want somebody to stop and help you.”

If it were you, wouldn’t you want somebody to stop and help you? If you were the one who had fallen into the hands of robbers on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, if you were the one who had been ambushed by thieves, beaten, stripped, robbed and left half-dead in a ditch, wouldn’t you want somebody to stop and help you? I know I would!

You know what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. We know it as the Golden Rule: “In everything,” Jesus said, “do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12). It is a simple principle. Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then take the initiative and do it for them (*The Message*). Isn’t that what the Good Samaritan did?

Haddon Robinson tells the story about when his son, Tory, was just a small boy. Coming home from church one Sunday, Robinson asked his son what he had learned in Sunday school that morning. Tory said they had heard the story of the Good Samaritan. He proceeded to give his father a blow-by-blow description of what took place in the story. Robinson adds that back in his unregenerate days, Tory was on the side of the robbers. When Tory was finished with his account of the story, Robinson asked him: “Son, what was the spiritual lesson of the story?”

Tory thought for a moment and then said: “That story teaches that whenever I’m in trouble, you’ve got to help me.” That is not exactly right, but, as Robinson says, from the perspective of the man by the side of the road, it is *one* way of looking at it.

Let’s look at the story together for a few minutes by focusing first on the context in which Jesus told it. Jesus told the story in response to a question – actually, two questions, in verses 25 and 29, from “an expert in the (Jewish) law” (verse 25). This religious scholar came with a question to test Jesus. Questions about how to achieve eternal life were not unusual in Judaism, just as people today, whether they admit it or not, long for assurance about what is in store for them after death. But this scholar’s motives were mixed at best. It wasn’t insight or assurance that he wanted so much as to test the teaching of Jesus. He may have been hoping that Jesus would slip up or mess up in His answer, so that he – the expert in the Law of Moses – would have the opportunity to show Him up. If you will pardon me for saying it, it is the sort of thing that too often happens in Congressional hearings, where, under the guise of seeking information or insight from someone who has been called to testify, members of the House or Senate will make long-winded statements intended to make themselves look good and ask “gotcha” questions to make the witness look bad.

Jesus, however, wouldn't let Himself be caught in a trap. In reply to the scholar's first question about how to inherit eternal life, which was just like the question of the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16; Mark 10:17; Luke 18:18), Jesus sent him back to the Law. Why did Jesus do this? Not because salvation could be found in the Law (it couldn't) but because the Law shows us our need of salvation. The Law shows us how we fail to measure up to the standard of God's righteousness. Without the conviction of sin, there can be no true conversion. And the Law is what God uses to convict sinners.

Jesus affirmed the expert's answer. He (the expert in the Law) seemed to understand that the essence of the Law is contained in the twin commands to love God with your whole being – heart, mind, soul and strength – and to love your neighbor as yourself. It is what Jesus on at least one other occasion (Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31) identified as the greatest and most important commandment(s). He said: "Everything in the Law and the Prophets hangs on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:40). No commandment is more important than these.

But if that expert in the Law thought he (or anyone) could live up to the high standard of perfect, passionate, unflinching love for God and neighbor, he was living in a dream world. And so are we, if we think we can be good enough to earn eternal life by our perfect fulfillment of these commands. This kind of performance-based salvation is possible only in theory. None of us can do it. Thankfully, salvation comes by grace, not by works. It is by the grace of God – and only by the grace of God – that we can inherit eternal life. Make sure you're clear on that.

Not everybody gets it. The expert in the Jewish Law didn't get it. He was looking for a way to "justify himself" (verse 29). He was "looking for a loophole" (*The Message*) in order to persuade himself – and others – of his moral and spiritual virtue. So, he asked Jesus: "How would you define the term 'neighbor'? Just who is my neighbor?"

Instead of giving an abstract theological answer, Jesus told him this story. The story was set on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. In Jesus' day, it was a dangerous road. From Jerusalem to Jericho was a trip of about 17 miles. It was a rocky, desolate, hazardous road. And it was a haven for robbers and other bad guys. It was not a good idea to travel this road alone, just as there are certain places and neighborhoods today where it is not wise to go alone. Especially at night. No doubt there were people who would say: "Look, if you travel the Jericho road alone and something bad happens to you, don't come to me looking for sympathy. You deserve what you get."

But nobody deserves that. Nobody deserves what happened to this man who fell into the hands of robbers and ended up half-dead by the side of the road.

Fortunately for the wounded man, along came two religious professionals – two "men of God" – a priest and a Levite, one after the other. Just what you might hope for in a desperate situation. They were ministers, after all, and aren't ministers supposed to help people in need?

But, unfortunately for the man in the ditch, both the priest and the Levite went out of the way to avoid getting involved with him. Both saw him lying there and passed by on the other side of the road. They were busy men, of course. They had things to do, places to go, and people to see. They had religious duties to attend to.

Besides, there was the possibility that the man was already dead. If they touched a dead body, they would be ceremonially impure for a week and unable to carry out their professional duties. They couldn't take that chance.

There was also the possibility that the man wasn't really injured at all, that he was a decoy whose partners in crime were lying in wait, ready to pounce on – you know – any “Good Samaritan” who stopped to help him.

No, these two religious professionals, who no doubt viewed themselves as servants of God, were not about to take any risks to help this man in need by the side of the road. Not under these circumstances. And we know, don't we, we know how often we are like them, even though we know the rest of the story and the high value Jesus places on mercy and kindness, on compassion and love in action.

Back in the 1970s, a couple of researchers conducted an experiment involving students at one of my alma maters, Princeton Theological Seminary. The students were told that they were to go across the campus and give a sermon on the topic of the Good Samaritan. Some of the students were told that they were late and needed to hurry up. On their route across campus, the students encountered a man in great pain and distress who needed help. (Actually, he was an actor who had been hired by the researchers as part of their project.) It turns out that, in their hurry to get across campus and give their sermon, some 90 percent of the “late” students ignored the needs of the suffering person. Just like the priest and the Levite. I am relieved to tell you that this research project took place several years before I went to Princeton. But I am pained to tell you that, had I been there, in my quest for academic achievement and approval, I would probably have been among those who passed by the person in need without stopping to help. It hurts to admit that, but it is true.

The hero in Jesus' story is a Samaritan. That may not mean much to us today, but for the Jews of Jesus' day, there was no such thing as a “good Samaritan.” There was a long history, going back more than 700 years, of animosity and contempt and bitterness between Jews and Samaritans. The Jews despised Samaritans. They looked down on them as racially inferior half-breeds. And Samaritans took offense at the Jews' pride and prejudice against them. In the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, we find this blunt description of the state of relations between Jews and Samaritans in verse 9: “Jews do not associate with Samaritans.” That's the way it was. Period. End of sentence. But not with Jesus. You see, there was no room for racism in the heart of Jesus. And there is no room for racism of any kind in the hearts of His followers today.

Nothing could have prepared this expert in the Jewish Law for the bombshell Jesus dropped on him. I'm sure he could imagine a Jew helping a fellow Jew, or even a magnanimous Jew stopping to assist a needy Samaritan. But here it was a despised Samaritan showing compassion to a Jew (we assume) who had been ignored by fellow Jews.

I'm not sure how best to recast the story in contemporary terms. Perhaps, instead of a Samaritan, we should think of the hero as an illegal immigrant. Someone who is in our country illegally. Or a Muslim from Pakistan or Afghanistan. Does that make it hit home with more force?

In verse 33, Jesus says: "But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was. And when he saw him, he took pity on him." In the Greek, the word for pity (*esplanchnisthe*) means a deep feeling of sympathy or compassion. Which, in this case, was translated into action. Sacrificial action. What did he do?

- He risked his life to attend to the wounded man's needs.
- He administered first aid, using his own wine as a disinfectant and his own oil (olive oil) as a lotion.
- He tore pieces of his own clothing into strips to make bandages for the man's wounds.
- He put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn where he cared for him.
- When he had to leave, he paid the innkeeper out of his pocket to care for the man, and he promised to come back and pay more, if needed. The two silver coins (denarii) he gave the innkeeper would have been enough to cover the man's lodging and care for somewhere between a few weeks and a few months.

The purpose of this story, like all the parables of Jesus, was to make a point. What is the point?

You probably don't need me to tell you. But I will. The point is that my neighbor – your neighbor – is anyone who is in need. Not just someone who looks like us, or thinks like us, or believes like us, or talks like us, or dresses like us. And it is not just someone who lives in close geographical proximity to us. Who is our neighbor? Our neighbor is anyone in need whom we have the ability to help. Anyone.

So, what does God desire of us? He wants us to be good neighbors to one another and to those around us who need our help in some way. God does not ask or expect any of us to do what we cannot do. He does not ask us to give something we do not have. But He calls us to do what we can to come to the aid of our neighbors in need. He calls us to care. He calls us to be people of compassion. And He calls us to translate our care and compassion into practical action.

The Session, as I have been telling you, has adopted three specific priorities for our life and ministry as a church in 2009. Under the leadership of Pastor David Fischler, we want

to see our daughter church, Redeemer, become a full-fledged, growing, self-sustaining “particular” church in the EPC, ministering for Christ with faithfulness and effectiveness to people in the Lorton and Woodbridge areas. Under the leadership of our Children’s Ministries Director, Julie Cloutier, we want to continue to develop effective ministries to children and families in our community, seeking to introduce both children and their parents to Christ and to help them grow as His disciples.

You are encouraged to pray regularly and fervently for both Redeemer and our Children’s Ministries. And, as God leads you, I urge you to invest yourself – your time and energy and gifts and financial support – in these kingdom labors.

In addition to these ongoing commitments, the Session has committed itself to these three priorities, which I have been talking about for the last several weeks:

1. To equip and inspire every member of Faith and Redeemer to live an evangelistic life.
2. To equip and inspire every member of Faith and Redeemer to minister to and disciple one another.
3. To care for the poor and the hurting in the church and the world.

The number of “the poor and the hurting” seems to be on the increase these days. The cover story in the November 2008 issue of *Christianity Today* magazine ran under the heading: “Hunger Isn’t History.” The reality is that though the world produces more food than ever, nearly a billion people (that is a one followed by nine zeros) still do not have enough to eat. It is estimated that, worldwide, some 25,000 people die each day of hunger-related illnesses. Isn’t that staggering? And disturbing?

With the economic downturn in recent months, needs are increasing all around us. Koinonia Foundation, our local ministry of caring and compassion, has seen a 50 percent increase over last year in requests for Thanksgiving dinner baskets. They have had a dramatic increase in requests for food and other assistance in the last few months.

It is possible that the economic crisis has affected some of you in personal and painful ways. Or it may in coming days. Companies are hurting. Investors in the stock market are hurting. Homeowners are hurting. Workers are hurting. Families are hurting. All of us, in our times of need, can use the blessing of a good neighbor. And that is what Jesus calls us to be.

Think about this:

To the robbers on the Jericho road, the traveler was nothing but a victim to exploit.
 To the priest and Levite, he was a problem to avoid.
 To the Samaritan, he was a neighbor in need, someone to help and care for.
 To the expert in the Law, Jesus said: “Go and do likewise. Be that kind of neighbor.”

It is the kind of neighbor everybody needs.

I don't know what opportunities to be a good neighbor the Lord will place before you. It could be through ministries like Koinonia or Sanctity of Life Ministries (SLM) or the Salvation Army. It could be through child sponsorships or other gifts to organizations like Compassion International or World Vision. It could be through contributions to our church's Deacons' Emergency Fund, which has given out more than \$14,000 this year (I think) to people connected in one way or another to our church family. It is a testimony to your generosity and to the needs that exist.

Maybe there is a single mom (or single dad) or an elderly neighbor or church member who could use your help. You may not be able to buy a home at a foreclosure auction and give it back to the previous owner, but maybe God will providentially put you in just the right place at the right time to assist someone in an emergency.

As the Lord leads you, will you be a Good Samaritan and do what you can, as an expression of your love for God and your love for your neighbor?

Like a good neighbor, Jesus wants us to be there to care for the poor and hurting in the church and the world. As followers of Christ. And together as a church. In His name. For His glory.

To the expert in the Law, Jesus said: "Go and do likewise" (verse 37). And He says the same to us.

"Now that you know these things," Jesus said, "you will be blessed if you do them" (John 13:17).

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.