

Drawing Near in Mercy
The Good Samaritan
Luke 10: 25-29

Slide: Helping Hand

Jesus tells a very remarkable story in today's Gospel, one that actually is known very well by most people. It's one of the stories Jesus tells that has leaked into our culture as representing any extraordinary act by an ordinary person to help someone. Even in our news stories, we may see: "Good Samaritan helps child from drowning" or "A Good Samaritan saved dog on the side of the road." You don't need to even be a Jesus follower to be a Good Samaritan and clearly, that is one of the points of this parable Jesus uses.

But, you know, I'd really like to have been in the room when scholars decided to call this story "The Story of the Good Samaritan." There is no place in the story where he is called good. Not one place. Jesus doesn't even call this person a good person. He asks the lawyer this simple

question: "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor...?"

"The one who showed him mercy," said the lawyer. "Go and do likewise," says Jesus.

Now, it's possible that this Samaritan was called good because Jews didn't believe any Samaritans were good. Technically, they were enemies, so for Jesus to tell a story about an enemy who is "good" would be shocking to the audience he was telling it to, including the lawyer who asked about inheriting eternal life. Likely this was intentional to get his radical view across that we are to be neighbor to everyone.

But, it has always bothered me that we now call this person good as if a good person is only a person who does occasional extraordinary deeds, and that somehow we aren't beholden to being that way all the time. So, I'd like us to steer clear away from goodness as that tends towards doing some good deeds with good intentions (nice, but that isn't what

defines us), instead of a way of being, of being neighbor, which is really what Jesus is speaking of in this story. What does being neighbor really look like?

What is your neighborhood like these days? Do you still know your neighbor on a first name basis, know their children's names, where or if they go to church. What are their hobbies? And, if you know your next door neighbor, do you know the neighbor next door to them? What about the whole street? Are there neighbors you don't know?

The idea of sitting on the porch or the stoop and passing time with one's neighbors is something of a rarity these days. It's making a comeback as now there are people forming family fun block parties to get to know your neighbors, but it's still pretty rare. It's not just the city where people don't know each other. The more we have our heads down, distracted, often pouring our time towards strangers online, the more we will not know our

neighbor standing right in front of us. Things change...populations' shift...and the question asked by the lawyer rings ever true even more for us than ever before: "And who is my neighbor?"

According to some New Testament commentaries and also if you study Greek a bit, the Greek word for neighbor, *proxi*, means the one near you. In other words, a neighbor is the one you draw near to. Look at your neighbor sitting next to you. Go ahead. Say, Good morning!

Now, if you are able to twist a bit, look around you. Do you know everyone here? I know the answer is no. And, yet, we are a family together. But, hey, it is a lot of people to know and people are coming back in fits and starts. But, give it some thought. There are people you have never "drawn near" to here in this place. There are people online who do not know each other online. What does it say about us? What does it say to a visitor? Are there ways of hospitality that we can

consider as a community? Just curious what you might think about that.

According to the Greek in this story about a Samaritan who shows mercy, your neighbor is indeed sitting next to you. It is the one you draw near to at any time. That may seem obvious but our 21st sensibility as church-y people is often the thinking of our neighbor are all those people out there that Lutheran World Relief feeds, or the Community Table, or Feed My People.

Now, God forbid I discourage you from helping a neighbor in Somalia as they are all in famine and there is extreme suffering there! But, quite frankly, I think that showing mercy to a neighbor who is next to you today may be a lot harder than showing mercy to a complete stranger who you do not know.

Plesion...the person you draw near to. The lawyer who asks Jesus about who his neighbor is would have been surprised to hear that definition. He was an

upstanding Jew who followed God's law, which a lawyer in those days would have been, would have only considered another Jew to be a neighbor. And, that's all the Old Testament law dictated. Did you know that? And according to that Old Testament law then, your neighbor would have only been the one who is just like you and that is the only neighbor you must show mercy...wrong according to Jesus. Your neighbor is the one standing next to you, the nearest person to you, whether Jew, woman, child, gay, Iraqi, Democrat, Republican or person from Eau Claire. The one you draw near to deserves mercy when in trouble or when in need.

Last week I was attempting to find some resources and help for someone and I called the Bolten Refuge House here in Eau Claire for some information. The lovely person on the phone and I got into conversation and it led us to talking about the same concerns we all have at non-profits right now and that is

the difficulty of finding volunteers and in some ways, even church communities to get the word out about the need to help Domestic Violence victims.

Statistics show that in small towns, the whole town knows who is being beat up. It's just that, like the first two in the story Jesus tells us today, it's easier to just ignore it or pass by it and we often think that those kinds of things are none of our business. It's so much easier to help Domestic Violence victims elsewhere than for people you know. Drawing near in mercy is uncomfortable and difficult. It's having mercy upon someone who is right in front of you who is beat up and left in a ditch. It's hard to enter into that discomfort.

Slide: People helping one

So, as you see, Jesus does not make it easy for this lawyer, he certainly does not make it easy for us when our neighbor is near us all the time. If we as a Christian community really were honest, we would admit the

tendencies as all faith communities have of our exclusive behavior. And, it's understandable because we like being together. The more comfortable we are with each other, the more exclusive we are.

In fact, when I walk in here on Sunday morning, I feel like I'm walking into my comfortable home - I like it here. Yet, that is also exactly why we are probably more exclusive than we ought to be. It's so much nicer choosing our neighbors

And, who is my neighbor? Jesus says it's the one near you, no matter where you are at the time. The Samaritan took that to heart...he happened upon a person on the road and that person was the one near him. He drew near a suffering person in need and responded. That's what made him good. His mercy is the example to us when we see the one near us each and every day.

The one near you may be in the car ahead of you going 45 in a 55. The one near you may

be a Mexican immigrant. The one near you may be at Mayo Clinic clearly looking anxious. The one near you is the person you don't even know who lives next to you. The one near you is me, is your husband, is your friend, and is your enemy at the town meeting.

Love your neighbor...this brothers and sisters is the Golden rule...but, this rule does not just apply to those who experience disaster in the Ukraine, or Somalia, or in the desert southwest, although it does apply to them. This beautiful rule applies also to the one you draw near to. If we love the ones near us who need mercy, we are doing the harder thing, the harder way Jesus calls us to as we stumble our way into the Kingdom of God and into eternal life.

Amen.