

## Who is Our Neighbor?

Luke 10:25-37

The heart of the mission of every church is the *increase in the love of God and neighbor*. Today we focus on the question: Who Is Our neighbor?

In our 50 plus years we have been neighbors to those who need help, near and far, and have sprung into action to help. Children with disabilities, the homeless and hungry, the marginalized and forgotten, from Statesville to Nicaragua and back. Who is our neighbor today? Who are the people in our neighborhood?

### I

Jesus rarely answered someone's question directly. Sometimes he reframed the question, sometimes he answered the question with a question, sometimes he told a story –which put the answer back on us. So we see in today's story of the Good Samaritan.

A lawyer, that is a scholar of God's law, the Torah, came to Jesus and said, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" It was an earnest one. Jesus answered with a question, in true rabbinic form: "What is written in the Torah?"

“*How do you read?*” he asked, a very good question. There are so many ways to read and misread the Bible.

The scholar repeated the double command found in Deuteronomy and Leviticus: to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus said, “You have the right answer, now *do it* and you will live.”

The man answered, “And who is my neighbor?” He needed some definition of neighbor that didn’t include everybody! Who can help everybody? The text says, he asked trying to “justify himself”, trying to ensure his righteousness.

And Jesus answered with one of his most famous parables, both inside and outside the church. How many hospitals and helping agencies through the centuries have taken the name “Good Samaritan?”

We knew the story almost too well:

-A man going down the treacherous stretch of road from Jerusalem to Jericho fell among thieves who beat him, robbed and left him half-dead along the road.

-Two religious leaders of some rank, a priest and a Levite, passed by, kept a safe distance and went on to Jerusalem. But a Samaritan, a person loathed by the Jews, saw him and put compassion into action. He cleansed and dressed the

man's wounds, put him on his donkey and carried him to an inn where he nursed him through the night.

-The next morning, he paid the bill and left his credit card number saying, Let him stay as long as he needs and send the bill to me.

-Imagine being in one kind of trouble or another. Who is the last person you'd want to help you? That's your Samaritan.

Then Jesus turned to the scholar and said, "Who proved himself neighbor to the man on the road?" "I suppose the man who showed him mercy", the man answered. "Bingo", said Jesus, and then said, "Go and do likewise." The story was not a pop-quiz, it was a summons.

## II

So we here at Grace ask today, "Who is Our neighbor?" Or, as Jesus reframed the question: What kind of neighbor are we going to be?

What about our nearest neighbors, our children? What about our next-door neighborhood? Too many churches live in obliviousness, even disdain, to the needs of those living closest to their doors. We have a beautiful green space and have an easy-to-use church building. How can these serve our neighborhood and community? I drove into the church parking lot one afternoon and saw two teenagers sitting next to the church with their skateboards. I went over and said

“We’re thinking about doing some things to our church grounds to make it better for our neighbors. What would you suggest?” They said, “The swings. They don’t work for people our size.”

We have a treasure of a green space. How can we use it to serve our neighborhood?

Who are the ones in the ditch by the road in Statesville?

Who is God *in particular* calling us to be neighbor to? Where can we help in ways that other churches cannot or will not help? PFLAG and Foundry House are some new neighbors we’ve chosen to be a Samaritan to. Who are some others? To whom has God opened our eyes and hearts?

So let’s talk. But before we do, I want to turn the story one more turn. What if we aren’t the priest, nor the Levite, not even the Samaritan? What if we’re the one in the ditch? And someone somewhere along the way has come stopped and helped. Like Jesus, or someone like Jesus, a friend of Jesus or someone who would not get caught being religious?

They’ve bound your wounds, and carried you to a place you could get well. You are a different person now. You are most likely now in the company of Samaritans. We are the wounded healers, the helped helpers. And it all started with Jesus, or someone like him.

Amen