

A sermon preached on the 5th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10-C) July 13, 2025
at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT by The Rt. Rev. Gordon Scruton

Deuteronomy 30:9-14 Psalm 25:1-9. Colossians 1:1-14. Luke 10:25-37

Sometimes we come to worship to experience God's loving presence and peace. And sometimes the words we hear from Jesus challenge us and make us feel uncomfortable. When that happens, we have to make a choice. Will we ignore what Jesus says that makes us feel uncomfortable? Will we twist what Jesus says to reinforce our personal opinions? Or will I, will you, dare to wrestle with what Jesus says, seeking to better understand what he is saying, and then ask God's help to live what he says in our daily lives, even when it makes us feel uncomfortable?

In today's Gospel, Jesus was talking with a crowd when a Jewish Scripture scholar and teacher stood up to ask him a question. "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" As he often did, Jesus responded with a respectful question: "What is written in our Jewish Scripture? How do you understand what you have read there?"

The religion teacher repeated what he had probably learned as a child: "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."

Jesus immediately affirmed the man's insight. "You have given the right answer; do this and you will live the way God created us all to live in this life and for eternal life." Next, Luke says that, wanting to justify himself, the man asked Jesus another profound question: "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus had the genius to respond by telling a very simple story, or parable. Jesus knew that telling stories can often help people see things from a different perspective. Jesus said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead." Immediately, the teacher and the crowd began to wonder: what kind of person was that man? How would I respond if I discovered that man on the side of a road?

Then Jesus continues: by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw the wounded man, he passed by on the other side. So likewise, a Levite, came to the place, saw the wounded man, and passed by on the other side of the road. Priests and Levites were people who served God in the Temple in Jerusalem. They were important and holy leaders in the Temple community. Notice Jesus doesn't say why they passed by and ignored the dying man. He simply tells us that was what they chose to do.

Then Jesus described a third man who came down the road as a Samaritan. For hundreds of years Jews had hated the Samaritans who lived on the northern border of Judea. When we hate others, we don't think anything is good about them. We call them our enemies. We dismiss them as totally wrong, before they say or do anything. Jews saw Samaritans as their enemies because they had a different religion, different ethnicity and culture, and had treated Jews badly in the past. So Jews at that time avoided even looking at them or interacting with them in any way. Just their name

and their presence triggered anger. As we all can respond to people we consider our enemies, their only wish was that Samaritans were dead and gone so they didn't have to deal with them. So, when Jesus brought a Samaritan into the story, the very thought likely triggered a visceral negative response in the people who were listening to him.

Jesus notes that when the Samaritan saw the wounded man he was moved with pity or compassion. He could feel the pain, the emotional trauma, the fear of death in the wounded man. Instead of ignoring him, the Samaritan went over to him, began to clean and bandage up his bleeding wounds. Then the Samaritan lifted the wounded man onto his animal, probably a donkey, and took him to the nearest inn to feed and care for him. The next day, the Samaritan needed to continue on his journey, but he also wanted to continue to care for this wounded person, so he gave the innkeeper money to take care of the man until he recovered. The Samaritan told the innkeeper that when he returned from Jericho, he would pay the innkeeper whatever it cost him to sustain the wounded man until he was able to return home.

Then Jesus asked the religion scholar: which of the three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? The religion teacher gave a courageous response: "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus simply said. "Go and do likewise."

I wonder if the religion teacher or anyone in the crowd changed their attitudes and actions towards strangers in need as a result of this conversation with Jesus?

Jesus often speaks about God's insistence that we care for all our neighbors, especially those in need. There are over 3,000 references in the Bible about God's concern and command that we make it a priority to care for the poor and needy neighbors who are around us and around the world.

Sadly, too often, we who claim to be followers of Jesus ignore this simple, clear and often difficult teaching of Jesus, and of all religions. God blesses us **so that** we can bless others, especially those in need.

And sadly, Christians have often been in conflict with each other about who we need to treat as our neighbors. For example, from the beginning of our country we learned from our Christian European ancestors that we could enslave people who were of other races for our benefit because they were not fully human, not fully our neighbors. Slaves were bought and sold and used like farm animals, like oxen, horses and donkeys with Christians, including Episcopal clergy and bishops, writing books defending chattel slavery as the clear teaching of the Bible.

Eventually, perhaps because they kept reading what the Scriptures say about the way God created us to treat our neighbors in need, the Holy Spirit helped some of our Christian ancestors in Europe and this country to say, NO! Slavery is not right. Slavery dehumanizes the people God says are part of God's family and our neighbors. This planet, all creation and all people and animals on this planet are created in love by God. We are all part of God's beloved family and God created us to learn to live together in loving harmony. Many people literally gave their lives to work and pray for the end of slavery and restoration of love for all our neighbors.

And sadly, the human temptation to walk by and ignore people in need that we saw in today's parable, continues in our day. I wonder, what have you, as a follower of Jesus, been thinking and feeling about the many radical changes in the way our current government is treating our local and global neighbors in need? Here is a short list of things I am seeing that I believe are in conflict with what God, through the Scripture, teaches me about how to think and act toward my neighbors.

- 1) We have defunded USAid around the world so that many of our global neighbors, children and adults, who have depended on our assistance will die from lack of food and lack of technical and medical support.
- 2) Our big new budget invests extravagant funds to hire more ICE workers and build more prisons so our country can more aggressively, without due process, pick up people off the streets who are of different races. We are told that they are all violent criminals. If that is true, after due process, they need to be taken off our streets. But most of those who are violently picked up by ICE are documented by the people who know them well to be positive contributors to our society. They hold jobs, pay taxes, their children are friends with our children and grandchildren in schools. Churches across the country are sharing stories of how beloved parishioners have been violently removed by ICE agents from their jobs and families and schools. These are neighbors we depend on to mow our lawns, cut and package our meats, pick our fruits and vegetables, and build our homes and roads. Now these people Jesus calls our neighbors, are referred to with dehumanizing words like they are just animals, rapists, criminals who are threatening our country.
- 3) Our new budget bill will also drastically cut funds for our neighbors who are citizens and need help affording food, health care, and housing for children, families and elders. These are the poor Jesus called us to care for and our national budget formerly provided for them. Why all these cuts? So that the wealthiest people and businesses can pay fewer taxes. Our new national budget made the ethical and moral choice to subsidize the rich who don't need it and deprive the poor of what they need to survive and all this at the expense of leaving an enormous burden of national debt to coming generations.

Some of you may see things differently, and I'd be glad to listen to your perspective, because all of you are my neighbors whom I love, regardless of any differences we might have, and I know that as sisters and brothers in Christ we need to keep listening to each other with loving respect as we live through this tumultuous time.

We also need to recognize that, as our nation experienced during the Civil War, Christians in this country are currently very divided by the question, who are the neighbors in need that God calls us to love and care for? Some Christians are enthusiastically supporting the budget decisions of our government and quoting Scripture to support their conviction that God is guiding this whole MAGA process and Christians need to support all these changes in our national priorities.

And there are other Christians in our country who are seeing these enormous changes in our government's attitudes and actions and saying, this is not making our country more like the Good Samaritan, not making us better neighbors with other nations around the world or better neighbors with each other in this country. There are better ways to live together on this planet and in this country, better ways to improve our government, better ways to improve our immigration problems, better ways to care for people in need in our country and around the world.

Jesus ended today's parable by saying, Go love your neighbors in need like the Good Samaritan did. So, what does Jesus want you and me to do as a result of hearing this parable this morning? The challenges we face as people who honestly want to be and act as faithful followers of Jesus in this country at this time will not have simple quick solutions. This is a very difficult and confusing season of life and we need God to help us and show us how to lovingly walk with God and each other in and through this time.

Let me suggest some steps we can take to listen for and follow the guidance of Jesus together during this period of life.

1. We can pray every day that the Spirit of Jesus will help us to think and act as good neighbors to everyone we meet.
2. As we hear or read the news and stories about people being dehumanized and not treated as our neighbors, as part of God's beloved global family, we can instantly pray for them. Instead of letting bad news overwhelm us, we can let the news help us to pray more faithfully for those who are being hurt and in need.
3. We can find a group or a prayer partner we can talk with regularly about our struggles and encouragements as we seek God's guidance for how to think and act like Good Samaritans in our situation. Through reading and reflecting on Scripture and conversations with friends who are also seeking God guidance, God will help us find a Jesus way to live through this chaotic and constantly changing time.
4. We can look for and give thanks for the people who are seeking to be Good Samaritans at this time in our nation and world. God's Good Samaritans are at work in so many ways and places. I am encouraged every day as I read new stories about their work. We can give thanks for and continue pray for our parish mission partners in this local area and around the world who let us support them in being Good Samaritans in their situations.
5. Perhaps the most difficult suggestion I have is that we take Jesus seriously when he calls us to love our enemies, for they also are our neighbors and God's beloved children. In person and in the media, I constantly hear Democrats who say they hate Republicans and Republicans who say they hate Democrats. If we are to follow Jesus, we need to model loving our enemies, loving people with whom we passionately disagree. Martin Luther King preached a powerful and practical sermon on loving our enemies as being essential for the long-term spiritual health of each of us, of our nation and the world. Of course, this is very difficult! Impossible without God's help! We can and should feel anger at injustice. And as we mature, we learn to weep for all that is not right, be clear to name what needs to change for us all to be good neighbors to each other, and to pray for and love those do not see things as we see them. Abraham Lincoln can be a helpful example for us. As the Civil War was nearing the end, in his 2nd Inaugural Address he said, "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nations wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Let us close our eyes and be aware of what we have been thinking and feeling during this sermon and aware of Jesus being right here with us now...

The last thing Jesus said in his parable of the Good Samaritan was: “Go and do likewise.” What next steps do you sense Jesus is calling you to take in your thinking and actions this week and in the weeks ahead?...

Perhaps the prayer Attributed to St Francis (on page 833 of our Prayer Book) can be a helpful daily prayer and guide for us all during this difficult time in our personal, national and global relationships. Let us pray it together now:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.