



Growing up in the countryside, we didn't exactly live physically close to other houses as acres and acres of corn and soybeans were in between other homes that we could barely see far off in the distance. Of course, Jesus wants this whole "neighbor" thing to go beyond those who live next door to us anyway. But even when it came to the other churches in town, those other communities of faith that would hear this same Good Samaritan story, and wonder just how far

Jesus wants us to go with this whole "neighbor" thing: there were the Methodists only a few blocks from us Lutherans. They seemed to be okay. We seemed to be on the same page with them, so no problem with accepting them as our neighbors. There were the Presbyterians on the other side of the street from the Methodists. They seemed to be just fine as well. My sister ended up marrying one of them. He's a good guy, so yeah, the Presbyterians can be our neighbors, too. And then, there were the Catholics: the closest ones proximity-wise to us. Yes, we Lutherans have a rather complicated history with them, to say the least, but we worked with them in so many other ways in our small town: sure, we'll cave into being neighbors even with the Catholics, Jesus. If you *really* insist on it.

However, I remember hearing about these *other* Lutherans in the world: these Missouri-Synod Lutherans, and, for the longest time, I wondered if I never experienced any of them growing up, because they all resided in the state of Missouri or something. Eventually, I learned that was not the case. They were scattered around here and there. I still didn't know much about them other than they didn't exactly promote women to higher-up leadership positions in the church. Could they be our neighbors, too?

Come to think of it, I'm not so sure I had any interaction with these *other* Lutherans until I got to seminary, because after our first year on campus, the expectation for the summer was that we signed up with a hospital or prison or nursing home to learn how to put our pastoral care into practice, to better hone our bedside manner, so to speak, to actually, learn how to bring mercy to life to our neighbors, as if Jesus meant, all our neighbors, even these *other* Lutherans. It just so happened that my summer was spent in Fort Wayne, Indiana, one of the hot-beds of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. A few of us ELCA seminary students who were going to be working at the same hospital stayed in a dorm of an LCMS college. And then, our first day on the job, we learned we would be working alongside two of these *other* Lutherans, two of these *other* Lutherans that we knew we were not on the same page with in a few different ways, to put it mildly.

One was a tall, lanky guy, who was preparing to be a pastor, himself, in the LCMS. He always had a toothpick in his mouth; part of his folksy charm or something, but he knew his Bible backwards and forwards. There was another younger woman, whose husband was already a pastor with a local Missouri-Synod congregation. She had so much talent, so much compassion, so much *pastor* written all over her. We ELCA folk couldn't wrap our minds around why she would want to be part of a church that refused to lift her up in leadership, but she remained steadfast in her support of her wider church body.

We didn't exactly agree with them on a variety of things, but they were our neighbors, our partners in ministry, doing our part in extending mercy to people in hospital beds, precious children of God, who sometimes reached the end of their life wondering if they were part of the right church, if they believed the right things, in order for God to extend *them* mercy, for God to possibly love them, as if their soul hung in the eternal balance. As much as we did not agree on a variety of things with these *other* Lutherans, we most certainly agreed that such children of God needed to be reassured that they were treasured by Jesus Christ. We agreed that we were there not to beat each other down in Biblical interpretation or how a church hierarchy should operate, but we were there to learn how best to bring God's mercy to life regardless of whose bedside we humbly stood around.

And yes, as much as we are reminded of this seemingly forever distant separation in religious and political and social living circles, evidently, Jesus staunchly insists on all of us being neighbors, on all of us being worthy of mind-boggling mercy. It can be so difficult, to say the least, especially when we are so proud of our staunchest emphasis on God's never-ending grace, on God's boundless love, on mercy that extends to all our neighbors. Not everyone agrees on that image of God. We accept that, but that will never stop us from doing our part in bringing God's mercy to life at our loved one's bedside, not to mention our homes, in the grocery stores, and yes, even in the church in all its forms: with Methodists, Presbyterians, even Catholics, and yes, *even* our Lutheran-Church Missouri Synod siblings in Christ. We have our differences, but by God's grace, we will find ways to extend mercy to the world, this world that God still loves beyond our wildest of imagination; to this world that God extended mercy to from the cross, and still has more than enough mercy for each and every day of our life and all eternity. For that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!