

“Love Your Neighbor—Who Is My Neighbor?”
September 22, 2024

Jeremiah 29:4, 7, 11-14
Luke 10:25-37

In these days of ongoing animosity and incivility and, well, *hatred* in our nation, my sermons are exploring the simple biblical message: “Love your neighbor.” I want to consider again the often discounted power of love. I invite you to see the beautiful image of God in each person and, well, love your neighbor.

Two weeks ago, we heard those key words of Judaism from Deuteronomy: “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.”

Last Sunday we heard those words from Leviticus that build on Deuteronomy: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Sometimes we do that, don’t we?

In his book, *The Common Good*, Robert Reich looked back over the past fifty years and said “As individuals, we are as kind and generous as ever.” He seemed to be talking about people in congregations like this one when he said: “We volunteer in our communities, donate, and help one another. We pitch in during natural disasters and emergencies. We come to the aid of individuals in need.” And, of course, many people outside of congregations do these things as well.

He added: “We are a more inclusive society, in that African Americans, women, and gay and lesbian people have legal rights they didn’t have a half century ago.”

He’s right. We do many things that live out a love for our neighbors. And that all sounds pretty good, doesn’t it?

“Yet...” There’s always that “yet.”

“Yet,” Reich continued, “Our civic life—as citizens in our democracy, participants in our economy, managers or employees of companies, and members or leaders of organizations—seems to have sharply deteriorated. What we have lost...is a sense of our connectedness to each other and to our ideals.”¹

A lost sense of connection with others. Ask a member of our Mission Board and they’ll tell you I’m constantly raising the issue of connection. How are we connecting with other people? How does our financial support of all manner of institutions help—or get in the way of—our connections.

We would love our neighbor. We would love our neighbor because of the hope in those words of Jesus: “Do this, and you will live.” We would love our neighbor, but our loss of connection leads us to ask again in our time that ancient question: “Who is my neighbor?”

If we can just set some limits on who are neighbors are, if we can just put up a wall and say: “Love those on this side, not on that side,” it would be much easier, wouldn’t it?

But our scriptures and our faith remind us of what happened when someone tried to set limits on love and neighbors.

Look once as that lawyer approaches Jesus. He knows both the civil and the religious law. He is well versed in scriptures. He has a simple question. He just wants to know: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Now, that’s a good question. And it requires us to define our terms.

Frederick Buechner famously said that “We think of Eternal Life, if we think of it at all, as what happens when life ends. We would do better to think of it as what happens when life begins.” So how do we “inherit eternal life?” How do we really begin to live in these days that we have?

So tell us, Jesus. What must we do?

What must we do to find life in the realm of God? What must we do—can we do anything—so that we find ourselves caught up and carried along by all that it means to be alive?

Tell us, Jesus.

And this is the problem. Jesus, isn’t always straightforward, is he? As he often does, Jesus answers our question with a question: “What’s written in the law? What do you read there?”

Well, the lawyer knows *that* answer: “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.” *You* could have answered that question. Those are the very words we have heard in recent weeks; the very words that speak of the deepest values of Judaism: love of God and love of neighbor.

“Do this,” Jesus replies, “and you will live.”

We seek the wholeness of life that is called salvation. We long for the sense that who we are and what we are doing fit together as they should and fit into some larger purpose as well. Certainly, such salvation, such *eternal* life comes with a cost, but something tells us that if we apply all of our mind and heart and strength and soul to the task, by God’s fathomless grace we might be those who love God and neighbor.

Do this, and you will live.

That should have been enough.

But it wasn’t. And we know it isn’t. Love God with your whole being. Love your neighbor as yourself. How often those words seem difficult and those actions seem beyond our reach!

The lawyer knows what he needs to do. We, too, know what we need to do. So, the lawyer has one more question. And it is our question as well. Where does this all end? Where can we draw the line?

In response, Jesus tells that story that has been retold so many times that we can easily forget how disturbing it is. has been said that the most dangerous passages in the Bible are the familiar ones, because we do not really listen to them.ⁱⁱ And this morning we are in very dangerous territory indeed.

Years ago, I told some that I would be preaching about the good Samaritan on an upcoming Sunday and his response was: “Why?” Many of us learned this story as children in Sunday school. Haven’t we heard everything that can be said about this parable? Is there anything *new* here, let alone any *good* news?

We call it the parable of the “good Samaritan,” and those two words have been linked together for so long now that any number of charitable and caring organizations call themselves simply “Samaritan,” with the understanding that they are, of course, good. Any Samaritan is “good,” right?

But before we hear this parable in the Gospel of Luke, we first hear of ancient Samaritans snubbing Jesus as he walks through their village. It was a long-standing animosity. And as far as devout Jews like Jesus were concerned, Samaritans did not worship God in the right way or in the right place.

It was unthinkable that a hated Samaritan would act in ways more admirable than decent religious people, or decent people of our own nationality, or decent people who *are* our neighbors. So, we find ourselves in this parable, watching the care that this outsider shows to the person who fell among thieves, watching as he brings this beaten victim to an inn, paying for food and lodging, promising to come back and make good on any other expenses—and we begin to think differently.

When we listen to Jesus, we begin to think the unthinkable: Good—Samaritan.

The outsider, the rejected person is our neighbor.

The one who shows mercy—even an enemy who shows mercy—is our neighbor.

When we listen to Jesus, we catch a glimpse of what it might be to do what cannot be done: loving not only our neighbors but loving those who despise us—even—and this is the hard part—loving those whom we despise as well. Seeing in them, not simply a deplorable person, but seeing in them the very image of God: a creature like us, able to love, able to care, able to show mercy. What was it that the subversive Fred Rogers said? “When we love a person, we accept him or her exactly as is: the lovely with the unlovely, the strong along with the fearful, the true mixed in with the façade, and of course, the only way we can do it is by accepting ourselves that way.”

Stories like this are dangerous. We find ourselves thinking and doing things that we might never have expected or experienced. A Samaritan who cares and helps invites us into a new and different life. This unlikely role model stretches our ideas of what it means to love and what it means to have a neighbor.

This deplorable Samaritan invites us into the strange new world that God is creating in our midst. For the sake of that new creation, we must often reject society’s rules in favor of the rules of the realm of God. The rules of that realm are just two—love God and love your neighbor.

Do this, and we shall live.

ⁱ Robert Reich, *The Common Good*, pg. 3-4.

ⁱⁱ John Meier, *Interpretation*, July 1990, pg. 281