

## **Luke 10:25-37**

An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “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.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”\*

## **Signs of the Times: Social Justice** - July 10, 2022

*Luke 10:25-37*

Today we begin a journey celebrating the work of our congregation by calling attention to many of the issues our society faces, from a Christian point of view. I'm calling this series "Signs of the Times" because over the past two years, we've used the fence around our building to display banners showing our support for various causes. We haven't displayed banners for all the issues I'll be preaching on, but they all share the same theme in that they touch on aspects of social justice. In the weeks ahead we'll be looking at the Christian and biblical perspective on individual issues. And I'll begin by addressing the question of why Christians should care about social justice in the first place. Moreover, if we do care about social justice, how does understanding that relate to our understanding of moral behavior?

This series came about because our congregation has always been interested in helping in the community and advocating for individuals and groups that have tended to be marginalized by society. We have walked to support hunger relief, we have housed homeless families, we have contributed money to all kinds of projects to help people have a better life. We have collected canned goods, prepared back-to-school kits, and attended rallies and marches of many kinds. More recently, we posted signs on our fence and participated in the Collingswood "Black Lives Matter" demonstrations during the pandemic. We had a booth at the Haddon Township Pride Festival and had a special worship service during pride month in June. Most recently, we are now displaying a banner that simply reads "We Support Women."

I'm proud to say that Collingswood Presbyterian Church is one of the few congregations in our denomination and in our vicinity that openly shares our views with the local community. Churches have often been accused correctly of not taking action and not speaking out. We do.

Such inaction runs contrary to the brave actions and words of many of the Old Testament Prophets, who were not afraid to criticize the leaders of Israel. While it is true that Jesus never directly attacked the Roman government, he did not hesitate to attack the religious authorities of his own Jewish faith and called them hypocrites. Moreover, Jesus found himself in a society where men of power and money had most of the influence. Yet, when we recall whom Jesus chose to touch and heal, most of them were people who were at the bottom: women, foreigners, children, lepers, blind people, deaf people, not to mention prostitutes, tax collectors, and shepherds.

Paul and the other apostles who spread the good news after Jesus likewise did not attack governments directly. However, they did work to build Christian communities into being. These early Christian communities were very different from the towns in which they were located. In the first

Christian communities all were welcome: rich and poor, free and slave, Jew and Gentile. Women had leadership roles. People shared with each other. They practiced grace and love toward each other. In short, the early Christian communities did not have to preach against government. Their actions spoke much louder because they lived out a way of life far different from the way society acted.

The parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus tells in today's lesson shouts loudly about how people should treat each other. Most people today, even Christians, do not understand how radical this story truly is. Unfortunately, nowadays when you hear the term "Good Samaritan" you think that an exceptionally nice person went out of his way to help a stranger. Indeed that is what happened in Jesus' story. But there is much more to it.

First, let's consider why Jesus is telling this particular story. Remember that Jesus often spoke in stories or parables. He was seldom direct with his explanations. Jesus instead wanted his listeners to really think about his stories and consider what they truly meant not just for the listener, but for the wider society.

Recall what happened right before the story. Jesus was having a discussion with an "expert in the law" and the expert had just told Jesus that to inherit eternal life we needed to first love God and then love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus congratulated the man on his answer because indeed, all the laws, rules, guidance, and advice in scripture boils down to these two requirements: First, we must love God. Second we must love our neighbors as ourselves.

Ah! So simple, yet so incredibly complex. As the expert immediately demonstrated by asking the question, "Who is my neighbor?"

It's interesting that Matthew prefaces the expert's question with the phrase "wanting to vindicate himself." In other words, the expert wanted to have a clear conscience about the fact that he knew that there were people whom he did not treat with love, but that was OK because those people were obviously not his neighbors.

Yet, isn't the same question true today? I mean, who are our neighbors, anyway? What is a neighbor in the first place? Are our neighbors the people who live around us? How far away? A block, a few streets, a mile away? What about those noisy folks who like to party all night and keep their yards not mowed? What if they look different or talk different from us? What if they display the wrong signs on their lawns? What if they don't participate in street sales or block parties? Are they our neighbors?

How about the folks who live in Camden? Are they our neighbors? Or the people who are regularly caught up in the constant shootings in Philadelphia? Are they our neighbors? Are the immigrants waiting at the borders of Mexico and Texas our neighbors? What about the Ukrainians? Or the

Russians? Or the people in Syria getting gunned down by their governments? Are Republicans our neighbors? How about Democrats? How about Independents?

This is the root of the question the expert in the law was asking Jesus. Who is my neighbor? I mean, as long as we are free to define who our neighbors are, we can feel real good about ourselves, can't we? We can say with a straight face that yes, I do love God and I do love my neighbor as myself because this one and this one and that one and the one over there is my neighbor. As for the rest of them, they are not my neighbors so I don't have to care about them. I don't have to love them.

So Jesus, in his usual Jesus way, turns the expert's question upside down and tells a parable about a good Samaritan. Now friends, how many stories have you heard about say, "nice criminals" or "sweet murderers" or "beloved con-artists?" I'd say very few because there is no such thing as a nice criminal or a sweet murderer or a beloved con-artist. They are all despicable, nasty people.

Yet, friends, in Jesus' day the concept of a "Good Samaritan" was equally impossible to imagine by Jesus' listeners, who were faithful Jews. To the Jews, Samaritans were everything that they claimed not to be. Jews hated Samaritans. Of course, nowadays, it seems every group has to be hating some other group, don't they? Whether it's LGBTQ people, or women seeking abortions, or people of color, or immigrants, or people of a different political point of view, somewhere out there some group has to be hated by someone else.

But Jesus knew perfectly well that Samaritans were the group Jews loved to hate. I won't get into the reasons for their hatred, but let it suffice to say that for Jews, Samaritans were absolutely the worst human beings who lived on the face of the earth — if indeed you could call them human!

Naturally, therefore, Jesus made the protagonist of his parable a Samaritan.

The story is simple. A man was assaulted and injured on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. I've been on that road when I visited Israel and it's a steep downhill path full of twists and turns. It would be very easy for thieves to hide around a bend to attack a traveller, which in Jesus' story, happened to an unfortunate Jew.

But then what happened? The poor Jewish man, wounded and suffering along the roadside — well, a priest, a man of God, saw him and crossed to the other side of the road to avoid him. Yet another religious official from the tribe of Levi saw the suffering man and avoided him also. So two men who supposedly were consecrated to the service of God went out of their way to ignore their fellow Jew. Is that, is that, friends, what God expects from us?

So it came down to this Samaritan, the most hated, despised, loathsome form of humanity according to Jews. This man, whom all Jews were taught to hate. This contemptible Samaritan — it was he who

took care of the Jewish man. It was the Samaritan who, despite all the hatred the Jews threw at him, took the man to an inn, paid for this Jewish stranger's food and lodging, and promised to pay the other expenses of the man until he recovered.

How stupid of the Samaritan? Yes? Maybe the parable should be called the Stupid Samaritan because after all the Jews had done to hate him, he certainly had no obligation to help a Jew. A Jewish stranger.

But Jesus asks the expert in the law, the Jewish law, who indeed was the neighbor to the injured man. And the so-called expert is forced to reply that the Samaritan truly was the Jewish man's neighbor. Not the priest, not the Levite. None of the representatives of the religion, tribe, and nation the Jewish expert was part of. No, the genuine neighbor was in fact the hated Samaritan.

And Jesus turns to the expert and says, "Go and do likewise."

This, friends, is what social justice in a Christian context is all about. We are called as followers of Jesus Christ to be neighbors to everyone. Everyone. Every one. Race does not matter. Religion does not matter. Status in society does not matter. Gender does not matter. Nothing, nothing, nothing matters except that our neighbors are truly all human beings on the face of this earth whether we know them or not, whether we agree with them or not, whether we worship, talk, look, or vote the same way or not.

In this parable, Jesus is answering the question Cain asked God in the book of Genesis. Remember God went looking for Abel after Cain killed his brother and asked Cain for Abel's whereabouts. Cain replied, "Am I my brother's keeper?" God did not answer Cain at the time. But now, Jesus responds: Yes, Yes, one thousand times Yes. We are our brother's keepers and our sister's keepers, and our enemies keepers, and the keepers of every single person on this planet. Yes! It is our responsibility as followers of Jesus Christ to proclaim and act, proclaim and act, proclaim and act until all human beings are treated with dignity, respect, and justice.

That is what we're going to be talking about in the weeks to come. What Social Justice for Christians is all about. I invite you along for the ride.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.