

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR*by Rev. Elaine Poproski***LUKE 10:25 – 37**

When Jesus was a very little boy, his parents, like all other Jewish parents of his day, likely would have taught him to recite the words of Deuteronomy 6:4 pretty much as soon as he could talk. “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

These words, possibly more than any others in the Hebrew Scriptures, are, and have long been, the quintessential confession of faith for Jewish people. They are the opening words of the Shema – a word that means *hear* or *listen*, which is the first word of Deuteronomy 6:4. If you were to visit a synagogue today, I can almost guarantee that you would hear these words.

The words that follow immediately on the heels of Deuteronomy 6:4 are these: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

Do those words sound familiar?

They’re quoted by Jesus in Matthew 22 and again in Mark 12. In Matthew, Jesus is asked which commandment is the greatest. He answers, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” In Mark, the same question is asked, and Jesus answers the same way, except in this gospel he starts with the Shema, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one,” and then quotes, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

In both Mark and Matthew, Jesus adds to the quote from Deuteronomy, with a quote from Leviticus 19. It probably sounds familiar to you as well. “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

It’s important to realize that no one was surprised by the way Jesus answered this question about the greatest commandment. Both the words from Deuteronomy and Leviticus were well established as a kind of compact summary of everything it meant to be one of God’s chosen people. As tests go, this was a simple one. It would have been surprising to everyone if any Jew in Jesus’ day had answered anything other than what Jesus answered.

And so, that being said, we come to Luke’s version of events. It’s in Luke 10, beginning at verse 25.

In a moment when we read from Luke, you’ll probably notice that Luke tells the story somewhat differently than Matthew and Mark told it. That often happens in the gospels. It doesn’t mean one is wrong and another is right; it just points to the fact that each gospel writer was writing to a specific audience with a specific purpose in mind. In all likelihood, this encounter from Matthew 22 and Mark 12 probably happened more than once.

Here’s what we read in Luke 10:

²⁵ An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

[One of the things I really appreciate about Luke's version, is that rather than Jesus just giving the man the answer, he turned it back on him and asked him what he thought the answer was. Jesus knew the man knew the answer. Everyone knew the answer to this question. It may be worded differently than in Matthew and Mark, but it's essentially the same question. He wants to know, in a nutshell, what's the most important thing.]

²⁷ The man answered Jesus, "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 neighbour as yourself." ²⁸ And Jesus said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

[And now, this is where Luke's version differs substantially from Matthew and Mark. Because Luke isn't done yet. We continue reading at verse 29:]

²⁹ But wanting to vindicate himself, the man asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"

It's an interesting question. Clearly, what the man wants to know is who he is responsible for helping – who is he required to love.

And this is how Jesus replied – with one of the most familiar parables he ever told. We know it as the Parable of the Good Samaritan. This story is so well known, there are actually laws all over the world that are known as Good Samaritan laws. In some cases, they are laws that mandate passers by to help someone who is in need of help. In other cases, they are laws that protect those who help from being sued by those they helped. In addition to Canada and the US, there are Good Samaritan laws in the UK, Finland, China, Australia, Germany, and Ireland. The United Arab Emirates also recently passed a Good Samaritan Law – they didn't call it that, but that's what it is. Here's the parable:

³⁰ 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. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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.'

I want to pause here for a minute to consider the word *compassion*. In verse 33, we read that the Samaritan was "moved with compassion." And then we go on to read a description of how that compassion manifested – how it showed itself. The man's compassion was evidenced when he stopped his journey to check on the man in the ditch. It was evidenced in his treatment of the man's wounds, in taking the man to an inn to be cared for and paying for his care. *Compassion* as it's used in this parable is a verb. It's connected to mercy.

Interestingly, it's only used as a verb in two other places in the gospels. It's used by Jesus in another parable, in Matthew 18, where we read about a man who was owed a great deal of

money by one of his slaves. When the slave begged for more time to pay off his debt, we read that the master was *moved with compassion* and so released the slave and forgave his debt. It's also used in Luke 15, in the parable of the Prodigal son, where we read in verse 20 that the Father was *moved with compassion* and so ran to meet his wayward son.

Each time this verb, *moved with compassion*, is used, it's connected to extravagant mercy. The slave was never going to be able to pay off his debt. The Prodigal son had no rights to anything, including his father's love. The man in the ditch was a stranger – a nobody – just a body in a ditch for whom the Samaritan bore no responsibility.

Moved with compassion is used as a descriptor of love – not the feeling of love, but love like that described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, where it's described in words you're probably familiar with: "Love is patient, love is kind, It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

When we read that the Samaritan was moved with compassion, and then we read about how that compassion showed itself, what we're really being told is that he loved the man in the ditch. We're being told that his compassion was tantamount to him loving his neighbour as himself. While there are things in this parable that would have been hard for Jesus' listeners to hear, I don't imagine any of them would have missed this point.

When Jesus finished telling the parable, he asked the man, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

Do you remember the question that inspired this parable? The man asked Jesus: Who is my neighbour. In the light of the command to love your neighbour as yourself, he wanted to know who he was required to love.

Now, at the end of the parable, instead of answering that question directly, Jesus turned it back on the man to answer himself. But that's not all Jesus did here. Jesus changed the question. It's only a slight change, but it's an important one. When the man originally asked, "who is my neighbour," what he wanted to know who he was and was not required to love.

I think, when we say it out loud like that, we're tempted to judge the man for his question. After all, we know we're supposed to love everyone. We don't know how, and we often don't do it, but we know we're supposed to love everyone. The answer seem obvious. We wouldn't ask Jesus such a ridiculous question. But I think we need to be careful of how harshly we judge this man.

We might say we're supposed to love everyone, but I think if we were to closely examine our actions, we'd have to acknowledge that the words we speak don't always reflect the way we behave. I think we'd have to admit that there are those we don't love. There are those we don't treat with compassion. There are those we walk past rather than face. There are those we don't feel called to love. There are those we don't feel any responsibility for loving. As we walk down our city's busy streets, it's easy to be overwhelmed by all the need – all the people. And so don't

we also want to know from Jesus, “Who is my neighbour? In light of the command to love my neighbour as myself, who, exactly, does that include? Because I can’t love everyone.”

That’s the truth of it, isn’t it? We can’t love everyone. We can’t have compassion for everyone. We can’t stop every time we come across someone in need of help. There’s this thing called Compassion Fatigue that we’ve become increasingly aware of during COVID, particularly amongst doctors and nurses and other people in the helping professions for whom the suffering and pain of others seems to go on and on and on without end. It’s a kind of burnout. It eats away at a person’s empathy. It can have similar symptoms to post traumatic stress disorder.¹ So here we sit, knowing that the answer to the question, “Who is my neighbour?” is “everyone,” but also knowing we can’t possibly love everyone.

What do we do with that?

I think this is why Jesus didn’t answer the man’s original question. He changed it. He asked the man, ‘which of these was a neighbour to the man in the ditch?’ In other words, “Which of these *acted* like a neighbour?” It’s a small change – a subtle change, even. But I think it’s an important change. The man’s original question – who is my neighbour – was a noun question – a naming question. He was looking for a nice, neat definition. But when it comes to love – to compassion and mercy – perhaps there’s no such thing as nice, neat definitions. To be moved with compassion and thus show mercy is to step into the mess of another’s life. It’s impossible to love, as Jesus defines love, from a distance.

Think about the greatest description we have of love. It’s Jesus on the cross. It’s God loving us so much he couldn’t stay put in the loveliness of heaven, but instead joined us in the mud and muck of our lives. He set aside his divinity to become like us. He suffered and he died because he loved us so much – he was so moved with compassion at the plight of humanity trapped by sin, that he allowed himself to be crucified to free us. Talk about extravagant mercy!

Jesus changed the question because what matters is not the who – it’s the how. What matters is not who we love, but that we love. What matters is not for whom we are moved with compassion, but that we are moved with compassion and that we live it out in mercy. I don’t mean to say people aren’t important. Of course it matters who we love and who we have compassion for. But not in a restrictive way. Not in a “it would be really helpful if I knew who I was allowed to pass by without helping” kind of way. It’s not about figuring out when I am and am not required to stop and help. It’s about those in need and whether or not I am moved with compassion.

When the man asked his question – “Who is my neighbour?” – it was all about others as objects upon which he might or might not act. This kind of attitude, where we reduce people to objects of our mercy or compassion or pity, is at the heart of many of the evils done in our world that masquerade as good works. How many of those involved in the evils of the Residential school system in Canada did so because they thought they should help the so-called savages. They weren’t interested in knowing the children or their families. They didn’t even allow them names. They were nothing more than projects for improvement – objects to be corrected. They weren’t individuals with their own unique humanity – their

own unique resemblance to our Creator. They were part of a group, faceless and nameless. Who is my neighbour? The savage Indian, the homeless, the LGBTQ+, the “fill in the blank with some broad group definition.” If all we care about is getting the definition right – the category right, then something is very wrong.

So Jesus didn't answer the man's question. He didn't define who qualified and who didn't. He changed the question. He asked the man, “Who was a neighbour to the man in the ditch?” He shifted the focus from the man in the ditch as the object of pity, to the questioner himself – the subject of the command to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. He turned the quest for a definition of neighbour off the other and onto the self. He made the question, not “Who is my neighbour?” but “Am I a neighbour?” And he made the answer to that question really obvious.

³⁶ Jesus asked, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” ³⁷ The man answered, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Jesus made the Samaritan an exemplar of the life of discipleship. He made the Samaritan the one who would inherit eternal life. He made the Samaritan – a man barely recognized as sharing the same ancestry and heritage as good Jews – the model descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He said, in effect, “What matters is not where you came from, or even where you're going; what matters is that along the way you love your neighbour as yourself.” This is what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

ⁱ Ron M. Walls. “Wellness, Stress, and the Impaired Physician: Compassion Fatigue.” *Science Direct*. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/medicine-and-dentistry/compassion-fatigue> (accessed July 9, 2022).