



**Sermon by: Rev. Teresa A. Larson**  
**Text: Luke 10:25-37**

**March 16, 2025**

### **Won't You Be My Neighbor?**

Last week the New York Times published an article titled “30 Charts That Show of How COVID-19 Changed Everything.”<sup>1</sup> A quick skim through the charts indicates that something definitive happened five years ago in March of 2020. Lines on the graphs of restaurant business, socializing, and global carbon emissions seem to drop right off a cliff, while pet adoptions, business applications, and YouTube searches for “how to cut your own hair” skyrocket.

There's a graph missing that I'd be curious to see, which is one showing the use of the word “neighbor.” That was an important concept (and a theological one at that) which informed many of the decisions that we made at the onset of a global health crisis. We stayed home; wore masks; socially distanced; moved work, and school, and even church online; and got vaccinated as part of our effort to be good neighbors to one another during an anxious and uncertain time. It was a rare occurrence of so many people collectively committing to a set of self-sacrificing mindsets and behaviors for the sake of public health and to protect the most vulnerable among us.

When it comes to being a neighbor, it's those self-sacrificing mindsets and behaviors that Jesus is most interested in as he has an encounter with a lawyer, a scholar of Jewish law, that prompts the telling of a popular parable. However, “what does a neighbor do?” was not the lawyer's question. His question was, “and who is my neighbor?” It's a testing question to pose, and an attempt to clarify the boundaries of who is in and who is out when it comes to the commandment to love the Lord our God and love our neighbors. Jesus doesn't fall into the trap the lawyer tried to set, but instead tells a story with a shock value that's difficult to translate to us modern readers about a man who had been robbed, a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans had a longstanding rivalry, and for Jesus to tell a story in which a Samaritan is the hero was absurd. Scholar Amy-Jill Levine says that “going from priest to Levite to Samaritan is tantamount to going from Father to Son to Satan.” There was no such thing as a “good” Samaritan.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, as the story unfolds, the sworn enemy is moved to compassion and meets the bruised, beaten man in his most vulnerable state. We get a clear picture of what a neighbor does. When it comes to whom to love, whether one is an insider or outsider, stranger or neighbor, does not matter: love and mercy is indiscriminate.

In his commentary on the passage, Rev. Jeff Chu notes that being a good neighbor is a vulnerable thing.<sup>3</sup> Like the priest and Levite who fearfully scuttle past their neighbor, we

have to be honest about what, and who, makes us afraid and makes us turn away from those in need. Like the innkeeper, we have to be trusting of others to do what they say they will do. Like the Samaritan, we have to take the risk of kindness and mercy. And like the lawyer, we have to confess our own propensity to wanting to draw boundaries around who are our neighbors, and who are not.

I would suspect that there is someone or something that is testing your capacity to be a neighbor. When that capacity is challenged, or we feel like we are already at capacity, it's especially tempting to draw those boundaries – particularly when we witness or experience for ourselves what happens when people behave in unneighborly ways and bring needless suffering to others. We may find ourselves asking, “how, God, can I be a merciful and loving neighbor to ‘that person’ or ‘those people?’” (Whoever “those people” are for you.)

Jesus is clear in other places throughout the gospels that we are to love and pray for “those people” that we deem our enemies, but that does not mean that we let bad, unneighborly behaviors off the hook. Neighbors stand firm in their conviction that anything that seeks to scramble our capacity to see the image of God in others is antithetical to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are called to stand in solidarity with neighbors most in need. We are to follow the Good Samaritan down the Jericho Road – listening to stories, tending to wounds, calling others to account for their unneighborly actions, and working together to tear down the systems and ideologies that leave people beaten and bruised in the first place. In a conversation with a friend on this parable, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “I am tired of seeing people battered and bruised and bloody . . . I want to pave the Jericho Road, add streetlights to the Jericho Road, make the Jericho Road safe for passage by everybody.”<sup>4</sup>

The paving of the Jericho Road is the task that we ultimately share together; it's a big task, to be sure, that doesn't have any obvious starting point – other than, perhaps, a tender moment of grace and love shared between Jesus and the lawyer, an often overlooked detail in this passage. When the lawyer asks a testing question in a tense moment with the obvious motivation to trip Jesus up, Jesus doesn't scold him for trying to prove himself smarter and better than others or turn away. Jesus stays in relationship, remains present, and tells a story about unrelenting grace and love.

I wonder how often we might most identify with the lawyer--desperate to justify ourselves, to be right, to feel superior...and I'm curious about what's underneath all of that. What is it that causes us to move through the world in such a way that we react without the compassion we know we are called to? Perhaps it is fear and anxiety about an unknown future; an onslaught of news alerts about events we have very little to no control over; grief over the loss of a familiar way of life we knew and loved; or insecurity about our own place in the world. Perhaps our own broken, weary, and fearful hearts are desperate for the mercy shown by the Good Samaritan.

It is in those moments, when our least-neighborly selves are on full display, that God's attentive, tender presence is able to meet us and puncture our defensiveness so that grace can thread and embed itself into our very being. As he was the with the lawyer, Jesus is like a neighbor to us in those moments, allowing us to see ourselves as we truly are: imperfect, impatient, and nevertheless worthy of Christ's loving presence. God's extravagant, unbridled love for us and the gift of grace heals us, strengthening us and giving us courage to share that same love and grace with others; to be a neighbor to all, paving the Jericho Road one new mercy at a time.

In a moment we'll sing our final hymn, "Will You Let Me Be Your Servant" and in the spirit of this parable, we're going to substitute the word "servant" with "neighbor" in the first and final verses. Let us sing this together as a shared prayer and a reminder that we all travel this road together, following our call to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and strength and loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. May we go and do likewise. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Aatish Bhatia and Irineo Cabrerros, "30 Charts That Show Ho Covid Changed Everything," New York Times, March 9, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/03/09/upshot/covid-lockdown-five-year-charts.html>

<sup>2</sup> Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Luke*, pg. 236

<sup>3</sup> Rev. Jeff Chu, *Commentary on Luke 10:25-37* from "Everything in Between: Meeting God in the Midst of Extremes' Sermon Planning Guide" by A Sanctified Art, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> John Hope Bryant, "Fixing the Jericho Road," HuffPost, May 25, 2011. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/fixing-the-jericho-road\\_b\\_422612](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/fixing-the-jericho-road_b_422612)