

A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to gain eternal life?"

Jesus replied, "What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?"

He responded, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus said to him, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live."

But the legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus replied, "A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He encountered thieves who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death. Now it just so happened that a priest was also going down the same road. When he saw the injured man, he crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. Likewise a Levite came by that spot, saw the injured man, and crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, tending them with oil and wine. Then he placed the wounded man on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day, he took to full days' worth of wages and gave them to the innkeeper. He said, 'Take care of him, and when I return, I will pay you back for any additional costs.' What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?"

Then the legal expert said, "The one who demonstrated mercy toward him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." -**Common English Bible**

I watched the first hour of the state of the union this week. And what I watched was deeply distressing. It was a demonstration of how starkly, deeply divided we are as a nation. One side of the room standing, hooting and hollering patriotic chants. The other side seated, somber and silently (mostly) protesting. In a way, these annual presidential speeches to Congress are always partisan affairs, there is always some division on display, but it seemed so much more intense and stark this year. So much of what was being celebrated by the president and one side of the room is a source of deep grief and fear for those on the other side of the room. There are likely some in this room today who are comfortable or even happy about some or all that is unfolding in this new administration. There are definitely some in the room today who are deeply disturbed about some or all that is unfolding. The division runs

through congregations, and families. It runs deep. And as the chasm grows, people are falling in, to their peril. A whole lot of people- robbed of jobs, of security, of dignity, of hope... as if left naked and beaten by the side of the road.

Deep division and distrust among people is not a new phenomenon. It is on display even in the story Jesus tells in our Gospel reading today. We heard today of a Samaritan. We also heard of Samaritans on Wednesday night, too. Because of this famous parable, when we hear "Samaritan" we think "Good." Though the Bible doesn't attach this adjective, we do. It is a fair enough adjective to describe the exceedingly compassionate and generous man who came to the assistance of a man left naked and bleeding on the side of the road, going above and beyond to meet his needs and bring him to health and safety. But no one listening to Jesus in 1st century Israel would have heard "Samaritan" and thought "Good." Samaritans and Jews had more in common than not. They both studied the Torah (perhaps slightly different versions of it). They both worshipped the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah. But the Samaritans thought proper worship unfolded on Mt. Gerizim. And the Jewish people thought proper, sacrificial worship only happened in the temple in Jerusalem. That's the main difference between them. They are neighbors. They are cousins, even. But after hundreds of years of interpreting the faith differently, they had little use for one another, little trust in one another, and often great disdain for one another. In the story we read on Wednesday, Samaritans refuse to let Jesus and his disciples stay in their town because Jesus is determined to go to Jerusalem. Jesus is willing to move on, but the disciples are eager to use their newfound power to call down fire from heaven to destroy the Samaritans. See what I mean? Intense division and disdain. Jesus spoke sternly to his disciples. This was not his will for humanity. But it is indeed the tendency of humanity. Even still. Divisions between kin are often the most intense. So many Christians have no use for one another because of our different interpretations of the faith. Is this so different than the division between Jews and Samaritans? And when we think harsh thoughts about our Christian kindred or worse act in judgmental or rejecting ways towards them, might Jesus not speak sternly to us?

Many of us may relate to the legal expert in our story today, and not just the lawyers in the room. From time to time, we may find ourselves asking anxiously, “What must I do to gain eternal life?” We might ask it more plainly, “What must I do to be saved?” I’ve had several conversations over the years with folks asking versions of this anxious question. And always I remind folks that salvation is what God does. Jesus answers the question though with another question, “What is written in the law? How do you interpret it?” I appreciate that Jesus is respecting the capacities of his questioner and reminding him that he has resources at his disposal for answering the question of the hour. And the man produces a summary of the Torah that Jesus approves. In other Gospels Jesus offers this summary, but here it comes from a legal expert. Basically love God with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself. We know this as the Greatest Commandment. Some even suggest that the first tablet of the 10 commandments outlines how to love God, and the second tablet outlines how to love neighbor. Basically though it all boils down to love. Simple. But not easy. And not a nice, neat, checklist. It’s puzzling what’s going on when the lawyer follows up because, our Bible tells us, he wanted to prove he was right, he asks, “And who is my neighbor?” This is a fair question. In most interpretations of the Torah, the neighbor is the fellow Israelite. Perhaps this definition of neighbor does not even include Samaritans. Perhaps the legal expert is suggesting his question stands because even knowing that the call is to love God and neighbor, he still doesn’t know concretely what he is to do. What is the extent of the love command? Whom must I love? And how much? Perhaps we have similar questions.

Jesus chooses to answer this question with a story, one of the most famous stories he ever told. A story of a man robbed, beaten, left naked on the side of the road. A story of a Priest, one whom one might expect to do the right thing and help the man, who saw the man, crossed the road, and walked away. A story of a Levite, one born into a holy, priestly class, a person of standing in Israel, who too sees the man, crosses the road, and walks away. A story of a Samaritan, one of whom a Jewish audience would hold only negative assumptions, who sees the man, is moved with compassion, and goes to him, tends his wound, lifts him onto his own donkey, takes him to an inn, cares for him there, provides funds for continuing care. He delayed his

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own travel to meet the needs that he encountered on the road. He goes above and beyond in the meeting of these needs. This is the basic story. And after Jesus tells the story he asks the legal expert another few questions, "What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?" Yet again, he respects the man's capacity to understand and interpret. And the legal expert responds, "The one who showed mercy." And now the legal expert has his marching orders. Now Jesus has answered, indirectly, what he is to do. He must show mercy wherever he encounters need. The question is not who is my neighbor, but how will I neighbor? A neighbor is one who shows mercy. Period.

I read a story on Facebook this week from a friend of a friend. It seemed to me that she is neighboring beautifully in these deeply divided days. She is a health care provider who is mother to a trans child. She wrote:

I have patients I know are MAGA. I treat them with the same respect and love as I treat all my patients. Why?

They are fellow humans. And genuine kindness feels like genuine kindness, no matter who it's coming from. And I have yet to meet someone who I don't have something in common with, even if it's just talking about getting tattoos in painful places.

I wear a pride flag lanyard, and I know a lot of them know exactly what it is and what I'm about, and I can feel their tense, ready-to-fight energy. I meet that with unwavering love. Unwavering. I mean that.

I can't say they walk away better human beings, but clearly they are wounded and/or broken, and if I'm the only person in their life who has treated them with love and respect, so be it. I'm not trying to be their friend. I'm not trying to change their mind. I'm just showing them a new way to be. Planting a tiny seed. Here, take this tiny piece of human kindness.

Because seeds can sprout even in the darkest, most arid places.

In the messy middle of life in 2025 America, may we be such neighbors, planting seeds in dark, arid places, showing mercy and kindness to everyone we meet.

Sources in addition to scripture that influenced and was cited in this sermon: Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson Jr. "Episode 630: Two Sisters and a Good Samaritan(Luke 10:25-42)" on the Bible Worm Podcast. <https://www.biblewormpodcast.com/e/episode-630-two-sisters-and-a-good-samaritan-luke-1025-42/>

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