

First Presbyterian Church
Luke 10:25-37, “Who Is My Neighbor?”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 6/6/2021

Today, and for a while longer, we’re talking about neighbors.

I want to let you know why.

A few weeks ago I led the adult education class,
and we looked at some of the work that the Session
has been doing for the last few years.

Back in 2019 the elders spoke with one or two of their neighbors about what was happening in their world that really mattered to them.

Then they brought all the notes from those neighbor conversations
to a retreat.

What emerged from our discussion and prayerful discernment was that people in our area feel disconnected,

they want to know other people in the neighborhood,
they want affordable housing, they want to feel safe,
and like they belong.

All of this led the Session to reflect on the theme of “Radical Hospitality.”

Specifically, they arrived at something we called a
“Missional Adaptive Challenge.”

- **Missional** because it involves what God is up to in the world beyond our own congregation,
- **Adaptive** because it requires us to learn, grow, change, and adapt in order to engage properly with it,
- and **Challenge** because they were challenging the church to be part of this work.

And this is the Missional Adaptive Challenge:

“God is working to connect people in our community at large who desire belonging, connectedness, and safety. We want to join in that but we in the church have fear and anxiety about sharing our faith, being vulnerable, losing control, and not having instructions. How do we address our fears and anxieties so we can extend the hospitality of Christ to our neighbors?”

When I presented this to the adult education class, I asked them,
“What could we do in response to this challenge
that would help us learn more about extending
the hospitality of Christ to our neighbors?”

And in a very Jesus-like moment, one of our more astute members replied
with a question of her own. She said, “Who are our neighbors?”

Who are our neighbors? Do we really know?

On this Youth Sunday we are reminded that our congregation not only
includes youth but also that many of our neighbors are youth.

So today we are beginning a multi-week exploration of these themes.

I propose to you that *when we combine love for our neighbors
with commitment to the mission of God we emerge
with something of the radical hospitality
which was practiced by Jesus.* REPEAT

But today we begin with that first question: Who are our neighbors?

As we emerge from our pandemic shelter-positions like a butterfly from its cocoon,
we may have the opportunity to hear this question about neighbors
and neighboring with fresh ears.

In Luke 10, Jesus has a confrontational conversation with an expert in biblical law.

This man seeks to *test* Jesus with the question,
“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Instead of answering, Jesus turns the question around on him ...

“How do you read it?”

“How do you read it?”

It’s a question that persists into our own day.

How do we read the message of God’s involvement
with humanity and the created order?

Not just “read it” with our eyes, or hear it with our ears,
but how do we make sense of it in our own situations day to day?

Our faith can only have something intelligible to contribute to the lives
of our neighbors if our reading of the Bible draws us into the concerns
of the world around us, into the concerns of our neighbors.

The expert was an expert indeed, and answers the question
about gaining eternal life well, drawing from the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6
(a central phrase in Judaism) as well as Leviticus 19,
“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,
‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Jesus congratulates the Bible expert, and says, “Do this and you will live.”

This could have been the end of the interaction,
but remember the lawyers intent was to *test* Jesus,
and at this point Jesus was simply playing too nicely
to have really been tested.

So the expert wants to justify himself further, and asks Jesus,
“And who is my neighbor?”

Who is our neighbor? Who is the one that I am to love as myself?

The problem here, of course, is that we all love ourselves tremendously
and spend a huge amount of energy caring for ourselves
and worrying about ourselves, and there simply can’t be
too many other people in the world who we could provide
with that level of attention and care if we also intend
to work and eat and sleep at some point in the day.

So...who is my neighbor?

Some people have felt the term neighbor must be restrictive.

A neighbor is someone you live next to.

So Jesus is really just talking about how you care for
the people who literally live next to you.

Others suggest that neighbor is broader than that.

They say a neighbor is anyone we come across in our daily life.

But still others suggest something even broader than that.

Given what we know about how our lives are interconnected
with others around the world,

our neighbor is anyone who our life influences.

That certainly includes the first two categories – and crucially so.

For his own answer, Jesus tells a story.

- He describes a man walking from Jerusalem to Jericho, lonely stretch of road, attacked & left for dead.
- While laying there in agony, three people walk by.
 - Priest -- passes on the other side.
 - Levite -- also passes on the other side.
 - These people are both comparable in status to the expert Jesus is speaking with.
 - They would have made themselves unclean if they had stopped, not to mention potentially fallen into a trap that had been set for them.
 - Samaritan comes along.
 - You might know that Samaritans were considered well beneath the status of any Jew at the time.
 - Eating with a Samaritan would make a person unclean, they were considered half-breed corruptors of the true worship of Israel, for they offered sacrifices to God outside the temple in Jerusalem.
 - So at a political level, a social level, and a religious level, the Samaritan was a person not to be engaged with by the faithful Israelite.
 - The Samaritan was despised by the Israelite.
 - But this Samaritan, seeing his Israelite enemy in the ditch, does not reciprocate the animosity of the Jewish people.

- Instead, Jesus says, he bandages the Jewish man’s wounds, attends to him with oil and wine, puts the man on his own donkey (which means he probably had to walk), and brings him to an inn.
- After staying there for the night, he gives two denarii to the innkeeper saying, “Look after him, and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.”

Jesus now turns the focus back on the expert, and asks,
 “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man
 who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

An interesting thing has happened in the way Jesus phrases this question.

The lawyer asked Jesus, “And who is *my* neighbor?”
 but Jesus asks, “which of these was a neighbor *to the man?*”
 I hear in this subtle shift a move from simply
 having a certain set of well-defined neighbors
 to whom one should be kind and generous
 to an active engagement with others by
being a neighbor to others.

Jesus doesn’t just say, “was this beaten up guy a neighbor just by virtue
 of being on the road,” he’s says,
 “the Samaritan *acted like a neighbor* to him,
 while the other (very proper religious minded folks) didn’t.”

The expert is forced to reply, “The one who had mercy on him.”
 (Apparently describing the Samaritan’s action was easier
 for this expert to do than *naming* the man as a Samaritan.)

So at one level, the question for us is,
 “What keeps us from being a neighbor to others?”
 (and thus, according to Jesus, inheriting eternal life).

Who are you a neighbor to?

Are you a neighbor to your literal neighbors – the people who live around you?

Are you a neighbor to those you see while going about your day?

Are you a neighbor to people around the world whose lives
are impacted significantly by our consumption
of energy and resources as Americans?

If you're a youth, are you a neighbor to the older people in your life?

If you're a middle age or older person,
are you a neighbor to the youth in your life?

Who are you a neighbor to?

This is, I think, the first question on our journey.

But it needs to be followed up by an investigation of
what characteristics, needs, hopes, concerns, gifts, and desires
our neighbors have, and especially how all these things
come together in something we call
a neighborhood.

So next week in our Zoom based Connectional Worship Sunday discussion
we will turn to reflecting on what God may be doing in our neighborhoods.

My friends, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

We belong to God, body and soul.

As a result of God grace and love,
we share in Jesus' life when we
love our neighbors as ourselves.