

Stranger & Neighbor
Series: Everything in Between
Luke 10:25–37
Sunday, March 9, 2025 (Lent 1)

Let us pray: You have already spoken, Lord. May we hear the word that you have spoken, so that we might know you, and in knowing *you*, we might truly know *ourselves* and *each other*, in Christ. Amen.

As you can see, we are starting a new sermon series that will carry us through the season of Lent. The idea is that we live in such a highly polarized time, and so many people view things in terms of binaries – it's black and white; it's either good or bad, right or wrong. You're either conservative or liberal, a Republican or Democrat. You're either with me, or you're against me. You either support this thing that I support, you're against this thing that I'm against, or you're *evil*. This is talk that we hear every single day. And while there are absolutely things that are factually true and things that are demonstrably false, things that are right and things that are wrong, life is not *always* so clear cut. The truth is not *always* at one extreme or the other; in my experience it is usually somewhere in between. The world *is* black and white, and it is *also* red and orange and yellow and green and blue and purple. Life and faith are both full of nuance and complexity.

So what we are going to do is look at the dichotomies in some of Jesus' most well-known stories from Luke's gospel and see how God is often present in the *both/and*, not just the *either/or*. We will look at dichotomies like rest and growth, lost and found, shouting and silence, grief and hope, life and death. And we start today with the dichotomy of stranger and neighbor.

We usually think that you're either one or the other. You are either a stranger or a neighbor. But I have neighbors that have never said more than two words to me. And it's not for lack of trying. I try to be friendly and neighborly, say hi to people when I see them outside, ask them how they're doing. But we

have lived in our house for six years, and there are several people who live right around us that are basically like strangers to us. We know nothing about them. And there are *some* who have actively been unneighborly and unfriendly. So sometimes neighbors can be strangers to us.

And sometimes *strangers* can be our *neighbors*. That is the case in this parable that Jesus tells of the Good Samaritan.

A little background here first. Samaritans and Jews had a long history. They actually *all* used to be Israelites. They were the same. They all came from the same place and practiced the same religion. But in the year 722 B.C., the army of Assyria (present-day Iraq) invaded and conquered the northern part of Israel. The capital of the northern part of Israel was a city named Samaria. When the Assyrians conquered Samaria, they shipped a bunch of the Israelites who lived there off to Assyria, and a lot of Assyrians stayed in Samaria. They married Jewish women and had children with them, creating this group of people that wasn't really Jewish but wasn't really Assyrian. They started combining Assyrian religious practices with Jewish religious practices to make this mish-mash religion.

When the people of Israel came *back* from exile in Assyria, they came home to find this new group of people who had changed their religion into something else. They weren't "real" Jews. The Jewish people who had been in exile in Assyria, *they* had *held on* to their faith and their identity there. And then they come home and see these people who *didn't* do that, and they *looked down* on the Samaritans. They weren't as pure or holy as "real" Jewish people. They didn't do things the right way or believe the right things. They didn't worship the right way, in the right places. They weren't "real" Jews.

Over the years this tension between Jews and Samaritans just grew and grew until Jews and Samaritans *hated* each other. Jewish people were actually *forbidden* from interacting with them. Couldn't *talk* to

them. Couldn't *marry* them. There's a place in Matthew's gospel where Jesus *forbids* his disciples from going into a Samaritan town. And then a little bit before this story we heard today, Jesus and his disciples *try* to go into a Samaritan town, but they are not welcomed there. These were two groups of people who absolutely did not get along. The Jewish people said that the Samaritans had distorted their Jewish faith and identity. They had forsaken their God, so they said that God wanted nothing to do with them. So this parable of the Good Samaritan – there *were* no “good” Samaritans. *All* Samaritans were *bad* Samaritans.

So the fact that Jesus makes a Samaritan the *hero* of this story would have been absolutely shocking and repulsive to Jesus' audience. A man gets attacked and left for dead on the side of the road. A Jewish priest walks by. Surely *he* will help him. But for whatever reason, he doesn't. Then a Levite walks by; another good, faithful Jewish person who works in the temple. Surely *he* will help him. But for whatever reason, he doesn't. Then a Samaritan walks by. And *he* saves his life and takes care of him.

We are so familiar with the phrase “Good Samaritan” that it has lost its originally intended shock value for us. For us, a Good Samaritan is a good, kind person who does a good deed; stops to help someone in need. You get a flat tire on the interstate, and someone you don't know stops to help you. We would call that person a Good Samaritan. But what would this parable look like for us today? A member of Hamas saves the life of an Israeli soldier. A Ukrainian woman takes a wounded Russian soldier into her home and nurses him back to health. A neo-Nazi takes care of a transgendered undocumented immigrant. Donald Trump lovingly tends the wounds of Hillary Clinton or vice versa. If you say, “That would never happen,” that's the point. If you are offended by the suggestion of it, that's the point.

All of this starts with a lawyer asking Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” And one of the things that Jesus is saying here is, “Everyone.” *Everyone* is your neighbor, including this person that you don't even know and this person that you do not like. We are *all* created *by* God in the *image* of God, and part of what

Jesus is doing here is challenging us to look beyond labels and stereotypes and *see* the image of God in everyone. Because every single person is uniquely created in the image of God. We have to look beyond what we are *told* about this person (or these people), what we *think* we know about them, the labels that we place on them, what we do not *like* about them, and see the actual *person*.

Who is my neighbor? That is a really important question that we should be thinking about more these days. Who are we connected to? Who should we take care of? If you asked Jesus today, “Who is my neighbor,” what do you think he would say? What kind of parable would he tell?

If you are liberal, he would tell you that the most conservative person you can imagine is your neighbor. And if you are conservative, he would tell you that the most liberal person you can imagine is yours. If you are pro-life, the doctor who performs abortions is your neighbor. And if you are pro-choice, the person protesting outside the clinic is yours. If you are racist, this person of color is your neighbor. And if you are *not* racist, then your neighbor is the person who *is*. The undocumented immigrant is your neighbor, and so is the neo-Nazi. The person who is gay or transgendered is your neighbor, and so is the person who says that what they are doing is a sin. The fundamentalist Muslim *and* the fundamentalist Evangelical Christian are your neighbors. The single mother on welfare is your neighbor, and so is Elon Musk. And probably the hardest one of all to swallow: the most rabid Dallas Cowboys fan is your neighbor.

Do you think that Jesus would tell us to *hate* anyone? He who forgave the very people who were killing him *as* they were doing it and gave up his life out of love for people who don’t even believe in him, for people who would curse his name. If our understanding of Jesus leads us to *hate anyone*, then we need to go back and re-read the Bible, because that’s wrong. But also, the person whose understanding of Jesus leads them to hate someone, they are *also* our neighbor. Being a neighbor doesn’t mean that we have to

like or agree with what they are doing (or let them keep doing it). It means that we are *connected* to them, and we are called to love them and care for them.

It's funny that the question Jesus is originally asked – “Who is my neighbor?” – is not the question that actually gets answered. The lawyer asks, “Who is my neighbor,” Jesus tells this story, and then says, “Which one of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The lawyer says, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.” The lawyer asks, “Who is my neighbor,” and Jesus says, “Go *be* a neighbor.” It's not about defining the boundaries of who my neighbor is; who's *in* and who's *out*. Who do I have to love and who am I exempt from loving? The question is not, “Who is my neighbor,” but, “Am I *being* a neighbor?” We can't be so concerned about who our neighbor is and the *differences* between us that it keeps us from *acting* like a neighbor.

The dichotomy of stranger and neighbor is a false one. Because the people closest to us can be like strangers to us, and strangers can be our neighbors. You cannot control who this other person is, what they believe, or what they do. All you can control is who *you* are, what *you* believe, and what *you* do; how *you* choose to live from a place of love and kindness and mercy for this other person. We don't get to choose our neighbors, but we can choose the kind of neighbors that we will *be*. May you be the kind of neighbor that Jesus tells stories about. Amen.