"Friend, Neighbor, Stranger, Enemy – Part Three"

Proverbs 3:27-31; Luke 10:25-37 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open our hearts to your sacrificial love and know true friendship in Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

You had to know that, in the course of a sermon series titled, "Friend, Neighbor, Stranger, Enemy," you were going to hear the story of the Good Samaritan! This is one of the most beloved passages in all of scripture. Many folks would use it as their number one, go-to explanation of what Christianity is all about: we're supposed to love our neighbors as ourselves, and that doesn't just mean the people who live next door to us.

But for a passage we love as much as we do, I would suggest Luke 10:25-37 is both over-used and under-plumbed (plumbed as in "plumbing the depths" not installing pipes)! Despite our shared and clear convictions about this story, there is a lot within it that remains mysterious. So we're going to go through it yet again, and see what additional wisdom we can discover.

First of all, it's important to notice that it's a lawyer asking the question here: "Who is my neighbor?" And what do we know about lawyers? We know that they never ask questions they don't already know the answers to, or at least think they know the answers to. That was presumably true of this lawyer too. The writer of Luke makes clear that this guy was trying to set up some kind of "gotcha" trap for

Jesus. He already had some idea of who qualified as his neighbor. And in that certainty, he's probably a bit like us. So before we dive deeper in, let's think about the presumptions we've brought to this story. Who do we think our neighbors are?

Once we ask the question, it becomes clear that we use this word a lot of different ways. Most literally, we think of our neighbors as the people who live near us, perhaps next door or across the street, people we can interact with without even leaving our own property, as long as they're not too hard of hearing. We might even include people we know who live a couple blocks over, if there aren't major obstacles like bigger roads or commercial districts between our houses. This is one, fairly friendly definition of what a neighbor is.

But then there's the baggage that comes with talking about good neighbors and bad neighbors. There's the people who will help jump your car when your battery dies. And then there's the people who play their music way too loud at all hours. There's the people who bring your trash can back in, and the people who have too many cars parked in the street. This kind of discussion of neighbors can bring up a lot of strong feelings and dramatic stories.

And then there's the discourse around "good" and "bad" neighborhoods. This is where we have to recognize that, like so many dynamics in this country, the way we relate to neighbors and neighborhoods is racialized, that is, influenced and shaped by our conscious and unconscious perceptions and attitudes about racial differences. What might seem like a "good neighborhood" to one person could be a dangerous

place for someone else, where they discover themselves unwelcome to the point of being stopped by law enforcement, summoned by the neighborhood watch. This could be our first clue that our earthly understandings of what it means to be neighbors need to be upended by the biblical understanding of neighborly love.

Jesus' response to the lawyer's question certainly does a lot of upending. As I said, there are a number of things in this story that simply aren't very clear. First of all, who are we supposed to relate to in this story? Usually, when someone is telling us a story, there is a character we're clearly supposed to identify with. Normally, that's the hero. So perhaps we're supposed to identify with the Samaritan. But he's a Samaritan, so it's unlikely the Jewish audience Jesus is speaking to would naturally identify with him. The priest and the Levite are not portrayed in a positive light, so nobody is going to identify with them. The innkeeper is barely a presence. So that leaves the "certain man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho." Are we supposed to identify with the victim?

This possibility hardly makes sense. Who wants to identify with the victim? The question was "Who is my neighbor?" not "What is a situation in which I might need a neighbor?" At the end, Jesus asks the lawyer, "Who was the neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" His answer, of course, is, "The one who showed him mercy." Does that mean that our neighbors are the people who help us? But then Jesus says, "Go and do likewise," which implies the opposite.

The solution to this identification conundrum, of course, lies in the truth that neighborliness is a relationship of mutuality. If you are my neighbor, I am your neighbor. That "certain man" and the Samaritan are neighbors to each other. But there is an even deeper truth here as well. The story is not just illustrating the mutuality of neighborliness, but also our shared vulnerability. Just as we have the capacity to help others, thereby loving our neighbors, we also have the constant potential to need neighbors to help us. When the Bible tells us to "love our neighbors as ourselves" it's saying that we must offer our neighbors the help we would hope to receive if we were the one with the need – because sometimes we will be.

Again, our familiarity with this story obscures just how hard a teaching is really woven in here. Most of the time, if it's not too inconvenient, if we have the time and the resources, we're pretty happy to help someone out, a friend or even a stranger. We feel good about it, if we've handed someone the extra dime they need to pay their bill just in front of us at the check-out, or helped a friend move, or donated toward a cure for a pernicious disease. But receiving help? Why do we struggle so much with that? Why is it so hard to ask for a hand when we need one? Nobody wants to identify with "the man who fell into the hands of robbers." But once in a while, we all do. Sooner or later, we're all going to need a good neighbor, whether we're willing to admit it or not. I think sometimes our aversion to recognizing this reality is so strong it actually affects our capacity for empathy with others' needs. To love our neighbors as ourselves is to help them, even when their suffering reminds us painfully

of our own vulnerability. Everybody wants to be the hero; no one wants to be human.

We've established that we're maybe half identifying with that "certain man" and half with the Samaritan. Let's take a look at those other two characters, the priest and the Levite. In theory, this story didn't require their presence. But Jesus put them in there. Why? What wisdom does this dramatic contrast add? In its original context, a priest and a Levite would be two of the most righteous characters to have coming along that road. But they choose not to be neighbors. Instead, the Samaritan, a foreigner who practices his faith differently, is the one who recognizes his neighborly obligations.

This contrast is the main lesson Christians have drawn from this story for years. And yet, we keep turning back to our non-biblical presumptions about who is likely to be a "good" neighbor and what kind of folks make up a "good" neighborhood. At some level, we know that Jesus teaches us that we can't rule anyone out as our neighbor, that we are called to help everyone, even and especially those who are different from us, as neighbors, and that the people we might expect to help us when we have needs may not recognize us as neighbors, but our prejudices remain rooted in our hearts; our stereotypes and assumptions cling fast. That's why we need to hear this story again and again.

The point of the story of the Good Samaritan, without all the deeper nuances, can be found in Proverbs too. There are two verses that mention how to treat your

neighbors. But it's the verse that comes before them that really sums it up: "Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it." The story version Jesus fleshes out in Luke makes clear who "those to whom [good] is due" are: anyone who needs it. It's that simple and that hard.

The story makes clear that we have no Christian rationale for withholding any good we can do for anyone, because anyone who needs help is our neighbor. In these days when we are all making choices that affect people far beyond our circles of friends and our physical neighborhoods, it's important to recognize this broadening of our spiritual neighborhoods. Who is your neighbor? Anyone you can do good for. What does it mean to love those neighbors? To make the efforts required to lessen harm and increase care for all those in need, with a humble recognition that "those in need" could easily include us. Those efforts may be at the grocery store, or at work, or in the voting booth, or on our computers. There is a meme going around on the internet reminding us that loving our neighbors means not voting for policies that would hurt them. This story that we love so well has serious, real-life implications for us today. We must examine our assumptions about who the "good" neighbors are and what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves. And we must do all of it, in light of our love for God, letting that ultimate reality fill our hearts and souls and minds, as we discover the new ways Jesus is inviting us to share that love with all our neighbors, the ones we know and the ones we'll never meet. Hallelujah and Amen!