

## Background on Luke 10:25-37

The seventy had been sent out in ministry and returned with news of great success

Jesus has just said to the disciples: 'Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.'

There is this sense that what Jesus is teaching and the seventy have been doing is hard to understand, that people's minds are obscured, and that the truth of God's word and work in the world is difficult for them to comprehend

Parable ground rules: Where is God in this? Where are we? Might place him and us in any role...and sometimes helpful to do so

Most of us have some kind of game or puzzle we enjoy. My uncle Bill loved jigsaw puzzles, the bigger the better. I have spent many Christmas afternoons sorting out all the pieces that had straight sides, so that we could start putting the border together. He loved hard puzzles with small patterns to identify and detailed pictures to discover as the pieces came together.

For my mother and grandmother, crossword puzzles are the thing. There are elaborate personal rules: early in the week you can't use any outside help, then as the puzzles get progressively more difficult you can ask a friend for help, use the internet, or go to the trusty crossword puzzle dictionary. If the phone rings early in the morning on a Saturday, I know that Mom needs a little help on the puzzle...but she won't ask unless she is well and truly stumped.

We have learned from medical research that these kinds of puzzles and brain teasers act as a sort of mental gymnastics to work out our brains. I have even heard that these "brain exercises" can help slow down or possibly even prevent Alzheimer's and some kinds of dementia...so if we exercise our brains, we'll have to come up with some other excuse if we're not in our right minds sometimes.

In Jesus' day, scholars and scribes and rabbis asked one another challenging questions about faith and everyday life as a way of sharpening their understanding of how God wanted them to live. If you are supposed to observe the Sabbath as a day of rest, what happens if your ox is in a ditch? It would be bad for the ox to die, so get the ox out and rest otherwise. Can you spend the rest day with friends and family? Yes, but you can't walk too far, because then it would stop being fun and start being work, and we don't work on the Sabbath. See how it goes?

So back to our story: the 70 had been sent out to do the work of God, and had returned with rejoicing and news of tremendous works done in the name of Christ and for the good of the kingdom of God. After giving thanks, Jesus pointed out that although their mission seemed so clear to the disciples, many others, especially people in authority, had been unable to see how God's mercy was meant to be shared. Jesus told the disciples in private that even kings and prophets had often been unable to see how God's love was at work, but that the seventy were blessed because they had seen it.

It's kind of fun to imagine just what this looked like, because the very next verse says, "Just then, a lawyer stood up to test Jesus." Now, we're not making lawyer jokes today. But I have this mental picture of Jesus,

standing in a huddle with the disciples gathered around him (seventy, mind you, not just the twelve) and this expert in the law standing up and saying, "Excuse me, but this doesn't make sense!"

There are two truths of Judaism that conflict for this poor fellow: first was the notion of hospitality for the stranger, which is a long-standing motif in the story of God's people. They themselves knew what it meant not to have a home, and so there was a long tradition of sharing food and offering kindness to the stranger among them. This hospitality was a response to the goodness of God to them, and a way to offer God's kindness to others.

The second truth is a little different: in order to preserve ritual purity, one couldn't get too close to certain other people. Gentiles, foreigners, people from "off" were considered unclean, and although the remedy for being unclean was relatively simple (ritual uncleanness gets taken care of with a ritual bath...all neat and tidy), most scribes and Pharisees would prefer to avoid the uncleanness by keeping their distance from anyone questionable...this also saved on bathing.

Remember these as we hear this story again: One day a man was traveling down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho...about a 15 mile trip, or most of a day's walk. As he was walking, a group of bandits (who clearly

didn't have issues with uncleanness or bathing) attacked him and beat him badly, stealing his clothes and all his possessions.

A priest came by and saw the man lying by the side of the road, but he did not stop to help. "Eek, blood...that's unclean," he thought, and crossed to the other side as he passed by.

A Levite came by, possibly on his way to serve in the Temple. "Maybe he's dead...contact with a dead body would make me unclean," he thought, and he walked by on the other side of the path.

But a Samaritan came by, and took pity on the man. He cleaned his wounds with wine and oil, the best antiseptic and ointment he had available. He carried the man to an inn, and contracted with the innkeeper to care for the wounded man (for a very generous fee).

"Now, who," Jesus said, "was the injured man's neighbor?"

There's one more little principle I forgot to mention before. Samaritans were not considered strangers to whom hospitality should be offered. Contact with a Samaritan meant that you were most definitely ritually contaminated. The Samaritans worshiped the same God as the Jews, but had the nerve to worship in a different place, and to suggest that their worship in the mountains was just as good as the Jews' worship in the Temple. Heresy! Sacrilege! So even though the Samaritans and the Jews

were ethnically close cousins and politically close neighbors who should really try to get along, they just couldn't . A good Jew would always cross the street—at least—to avoid a Samaritan, and presumably, the reverse was also true.

Most of us have heard this story many times...this is one of those wonderful morality plays that we learn early on in Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. We know these lessons, they are central to who we are as Christians, how we understand God's mercy to be calling us to reach out to others...who is the injured man's neighbor? The Samaritan, of course, and so we learn that in Christ's love, we reach out beyond ourselves and our comfort levels to embrace others as our neighbor. We learn that our neighbor is the one who needs something from us, anyone who needs something from us, and because we are a people who has been blessed by God, we share what we have with our neighbor. We know that we might find our neighbor here in these pews, across the grocery store aisle, living in a storm-damaged home in our community, suffering the effects of earthquake or famine or war on the other side of our country or halfway across the world. And we know that we are called to seek out our neighbor, to look for the needs we can meet, to be kind and gracious to one

another, that this is meant to be an active searching kind of love, like Jesus' love for us.

Malcolm Gladwell, who wrote a wonderful book about how things change called *The Tipping Point*, conducted a study recently in which he created a situation where someone was in need and watched people's responses. His human guinea pigs were seminary students, who would presumably have a pretty strong sense that they needed to care for someone in need. What he learned is that if they felt rushed, no matter what their training was or how caring they were thought to be, they were more likely to simply walk past someone who needed their help. A sense of being overwhelmed by their own agenda and the busyness around them prevented them from being a neighbor to someone in need.

As we have learned the parable of the Good Samaritan over the course of our lives, we have heard the lesson again and again that Christians do not ignore the needs around us, that we put aside our own schedule and concerns for the sake of those around us. We are meant to be the neighbor to those in need...and Malcolm Gladwell's study tells us that sometimes we quite simply fail. We don't see the need around us, or we fail to respond. We miss the signs, avoid the opportunities, or simply move too fast in our busy, rushed world to know our neighbors, to be a

neighbor...if a neighbor is the one who shows mercy, sometimes we are just not good neighbors. If the Samaritan is our only role model, we are frequently failures.

But parables are about what ifs: what if sometimes we're not the Samaritan, we're not the one who shows mercy? What if sometimes it's not up to us to seek out those less fortunate, those who need our help? What if sometimes we are the injured one, on the side of the road? What if we are the one in need, and not the one with all the blessings? If we treat this parable as we treat the others, then we find ourselves trying on all the roles: sometimes we are like the priest, too concerned about being soiled to stop to do a good deed for someone along the way. Sometimes we are like the Levite, in too much of a hurry to get to our good works someplace else to see what's before us. Sometimes we are the Samaritans, who are able to stop, to offer companionship and assistance, and sometimes, my brothers and sisters, sometimes, we are the one who is in need. Our hearts broken, our lives battered and torn, our bodies and emotions and homes damaged and beaten by life, by acts of nature or of other people, or our own. And whenever we find ourselves failing, in body or spirit or good intention, the grace of God finds us.

The Sunday night worship team has heard me refer to both my favorite living singer/songwriter/theologian (that's Chris Rice), and my favorite dead one, whose name is Rich Mullins. But my second favorite dead singer/songwriter/theologian is an American icon, someone who taught most of us under a "certain age" about what it means to be a neighbor? Any guesses? Think about cardigan sweaters and changing into sneakers, and this little song:

It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood,  
A beautiful day for a neighbor.  
Would you be mine?  
Could you be mine?...

I've always wanted to have a neighbor just like you.  
I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you.

So, let's make the most of this beautiful day.  
Since we're together we might as well say:  
Would you be mine?  
Could you be mine?  
Won't you be my neighbor?  
Won't you please,  
Won't you please?  
Please won't you be my neighbor?

The Reverend Fred Rogers taught generations of American children what it means to be a neighbor...he taught us what Jesus meant us to learn from the parable of the Good Samaritan and from the other stories and sermons in the Bible: our neighbor is not the one who is somehow not

as fortunate as us, whom we can find and help...or at least not always.

Our neighbor is not the one whose help we are seeking, who has something we need...or at least not always. Mr. Rogers taught me, and millions of others, that our neighbor is the one we welcome, and the one who welcomes us. Our neighbor is the one to whom we say, "would you be mine? Please won't you be my neighbor?" and the one who asks us the same question.

According to Mr. Rogers, "since we're together" we can be neighbors, if we will...all it takes is sharing a sense of God's mercy, which is given to us all. We do Mr. Rogers, and Jesus, and ourselves, a grave disservice if we think of being neighborly as involving some sort of hierarchy: one has to be somehow better than the other, because of what they have to offer, and one has to be somehow less, because of their need. Instead, we must realize that we all have something to offer, from the poorest and most broken among us to the most blessed in spiritual and material things. And we must remember as well that we are all sometimes in need...in our lives we will all be both blessed and broken, sometimes simultaneously, and God's mercy is there with us, both in the blessings and in the breaks.

This is the lesson of the parable of the Good Samaritan: who is a neighbor? We all are. What is a neighbor? A neighbor is someone who

wants to know you, to include you, to make you a part of their world. We are being neighborly when we seek to make someone else a part of our world. A neighbor shares, both in the good and the bad moments of life: shares joys and concerns, tears and laughter, love and pain.

Who is our neighbor? Jesus Christ, for one, who wants to know us, and for us to know him. He wants to include us, and to include others, to make us all a part of his Kingdom, to share with everyone in the good and bad moments of life, until in the resurrection we find that there is only good. He is the perfect neighbor, who lived and died among us so that we might come to know God as our neighbor, and be given the gift of the resurrection. He is *our* neighbor, yours and mine, to share with others, having given himself for us...for everyone. And so how can we be less than a neighbor to others? Jesus reaches out to us in the words: "I've always wanted to have a neighbor just like you. I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you."

May our response truly be:

So, let's make the most of this beautiful day.

Since we're together we might as well say:

Would you be mine?

Won't You Be My Neighbor  
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Could you be mine?

Won't you be my neighbor?