

## The Neighbor Question

LUKE 10:25-37 (NRSV) *Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*<sup>26</sup> *He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"*<sup>27</sup> *He answered, "You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself."*<sup>28</sup> *And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."*<sup>29</sup> *But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*<sup>30</sup> *Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead."*<sup>31</sup> *Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.*<sup>32</sup> *So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.*<sup>33</sup> *But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.*<sup>34</sup> *He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.*<sup>35</sup> *The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'*<sup>36</sup> *Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"*<sup>37</sup> *He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."*

"And who is my neighbor?" In the Gospel reading, this is the lawyer's second question. The first was, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It's a universal human religious quest: "What MUST I DO?" What's the least I have to do

Jesus answered, "Love God and love your neighbor," and the attorney (the text adds, "wanting to justify himself,") asked, "And who is my neighbor?" He was seeking to limit, rather than to expand the scope of who his neighbor is.<sup>1</sup>

The Parable of the Good Samaritan isn't just a nice story urging us to reach out to others. It's not about going out of your way or investing money or inconveniencing yourself. Samaritans were not "good people" as far as Judeans were concerned. They were a despised mixed race, "foreigners" to the Jewish tribe. They were neither liked nor trusted. Some feared them. They invoked disgust, not admiration. But Jesus chose the hated "other" as his example of who our neighbor is;<sup>2</sup> and not as the neighbor to whom we reach out, but the one who reaches out!

In today's chaotic, adversarial culture, virtually every ideology—religious, political, cultural, scientific, educational—even ethics, morality, and common courtesy are mired in divisive rhetoric. And it's no exaggeration to say that Christianity in America is in danger of being hijacked.

While the religious right pounds away at the individual responsibility and the horrors of abortion and homosexuality, the religious left addresses social responsibility: the systemic, destructive nature of racism, misogyny, white supremacism, and tribalism. There is no common ground, no open dialogue. There are only insults and judgments hurled across some assumed line in the sand.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

In my observation, the greatest danger to Christianity is a church that is a house divided, with no visible effort or willingness to reconcile the divisions. Jesus said, "If I am lifted up, I will draw all people to me." A divided church repels, rather than attracting.

I'll share again the story about an encounter between Evangelist, E. Stanley Jones and Mahatma Gandhi. Jones asks, "Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why do you appear so adamantly to reject becoming his follower?"

Gandhi replied: "Oh, I don't reject Christ. I love Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike Christ."

Which brings me to the inspiration for these sermons. In his book, *CHRIST IN CRISIS: WHY WE NEED TO RECLAIM JESUS*, Jim Wallis discerns: "We have become disconnected from Jesus. We're not standing and acting in his name or with his values..." (and I would add, instead, we too often attempt to push Jesus into the molds of our already existing political biases and religious doctrines.) (pp. 10-11)

Wallis studied the Gospels, looking for ways to reclaim Jesus—to reconnect with him—and he found eight questions: eight teachings of Jesus by which we can discern the degree to which we are connected with our Lord.

Last week we looked at "The Image Question." A primary step in reclaiming Jesus is to acknowledge and honor the common thread that unites all humanity: we all are created in the image of God. Paraphrasing Wallis:

*In other words, undergirding all human rights, equality, and dignity is this notion that all humanity is created in the image of God. No matter their ethnicity, gender, who they are, how they worship, or who they love, seeing all people as full image-bearers of God blocks any human attempt to build barriers or divisions between groups. Such barriers and divisions are a brutal assault on the image of God.<sup>3</sup>*

The second standard by which we can see if we truly are reclaiming Jesus is "The Neighbor Question:" "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus answers in a way that upends human expectations and gets to the heart of the matter.

*A man went down from Conway to Bigelow, and fell among thieves, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a Protestant minister was going down that road; and when he saw him, drove on by. Then an Evangelical Seminary Professor, upon seeing the man lying near the road, drove on by. But a Muslim driving along that road saw him, was moved with pity. He dressed his wounds with antiseptic and bandages, then loaded him in his vehicle and took him to an urgent care clinic and paid for his care. Which of these*

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<sup>3</sup> Wallis, Jim. *Christ in Crisis* (p. 46-47). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.

*three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of thieves?*

Given the residential, economic, and even religious segregation that defines where most of us live, we can't really do what Jesus says until we disrupt our normal boundaries by moving outside of them. And since such racial and socioeconomic geography isn't accidental but the result of systems of policies and structures, we need to ask ourselves whether we're willing and ready to cross those lines—the ones that preclude any answer to "The Neighbor Question."<sup>4</sup>

These questions must not become reduced to political, partisan issues between left and right, liberals and conservatives. They *first* are matters of faith that can bring us together, even *across* political boundaries.<sup>5</sup> Remember: Jesus closed this parable with the command: "Go and do likewise."

In Cordova, Tennessee, a little suburb outside Memphis, there's a church called Heartsong. In a 2011 article in *Christianity Today*, pastor Steve Stone wrote about how his congregation invited Muslims from the Memphis Islamic Center to use their Celebration Center for Ramadan prayers. He wrote:

"As a Jesus-following tribe we could not be more evangelical and exclusivist when it comes to Jesus. We are 21st century Jesus freaks, and we fly that flag on T-shirts which many of us wore as we greeted the Muslims who came for Ramadan prayers each night. All we have ever done or will ever do is be a witness to Jesus—his teaching, his life, his death and resurrection, and the presence of the Holy Spirit with, in, and through us.

"Our Muslim brothers and sisters know this about us because we always speak of Jesus and our love for him, and our love for them because of him, every time we are with them. There was no trading of theologies. They are Muslims; we are Jesus followers; both of us are clear about that. Jesus said people would know we are his disciples by our love for one another, and that is just what is happening with the dear and gracious people of the MIC. They recognize us as people who have been with Jesus.

"No thought at all was given to the political ramifications of that decision, either regarding those among our flock who might disagree with it or anyone anywhere who might attack or applaud what we were doing. The decision was firmly based only on our understanding of the mission and nature of the church."<sup>6</sup>

As you might expect, the pastor and his church received hate messages and vandalism. CNN picked up the story, and Pastor Stone and the Muslim Imam were interviewed. The interview was seen in Kashmir, Pakistan, and Pastor Stone received a phone call at 2:00 o'clock in the morning. The caller said:

'We are a roomful of Muslim men, ...and we saw the CNN segment. We were all silent for a long time afterward. Then one of us said, "I think God is speaking to us through that pastor." Another said, "How could we ever kill those people?" I must tell you what happened with another one of us because he can't speak English to tell you himself. He went out to the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 30

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.40.

small Christian church near our mosque and washed it clean with his Muslim hands. Now we are all back together calling you. Pastor, please tell your congregation that we don't hate them, we love them. And from now on we will protect that little Christian church near us because of what you did.”

In the town of Cordova there was no more hatred or violence expressed against Muslims because of what the Heartsong church did—they simply followed Jesus's teaching and answered “The Neighbor Question.”<sup>7</sup>

Prayer Slide

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 40-41.