

And Who Is My Neighbor?

A SERMON BY THE REV. RICHARD W. NEAL

BASED ON PSALM 87 AND LUKE 10:25-37

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“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell among the hands of the robbers?” (Luke 10:36)

JUST WHO IS BEING TESTED HERE? A lawyer stood up to test Jesus with a question, and by the end of the story Jesus is testing the lawyer with a question of his own. But is it Jesus who is testing the lawyer, or is Luke testing the first-century readers of his gospel? Or is it you and I who are now being tested? This may be a trick question, so we need to listen very carefully and not rush to understanding about the story we’ve come to know as the parable of the good Samaritan.

Most of us long ago learned the simple point of the parable: Be like the Samaritan, and go out of your way to help those who need your help. Love your neighbor like the Samaritan loved the robbery victim, and one day you will inherit eternal life. Even Luke seems to interpret the parable that way. But is that what Jesus had in mind?

As Luke tells the story, a lawyer – a religious expert who knows his faith well – stands up to test Jesus. “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life” (Luke 10:25)? And Jesus affirms what the lawyer already knows. Love God with everything you have and everything you are, and love your neighbor as yourself. “Do this,” Jesus tells him, “and you will live” (v. 28).

But the lawyer presses further. “And who is my neighbor?” Maybe he wants to carefully define whom he must love so he will know whom he need not love. Maybe he’s trying to avoid responsibility for a relationship with someone from whom he is already estranged. Here’s where Jesus tells the story of a man who fell among thieves on the road to Jericho. And here’s where we’ve got to listen very carefully.

The lawyer wants to know whom he must love in order to gain the life he seeks, so he asks, “Who is my neighbor?” “Well,” Jesus replies, after telling the parable, “who is neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers” (v. 36)? Are you really listening now? Do you catch the parallel? Who is the lawyer’s neighbor; who is the *victim’s* neighbor? Whom is the lawyer to love; whom is the *victim* to love? Of course, you’d expect him to love the priest and the Levite. They upheld the community’s values

and helped preserve order and structure in society. They were the ones who seemed to have the resources and power to serve the victim's health and well-being. Of course the victim would love them, and so would the lawyer.

But in the parable, the Samaritan turns out to be the neighbor whom the victim is to love. The despised and rejected Samaritan; the one who betrayed society's values; the one who compromised his people's faith; the one who is seen as having nothing of value to offer – *that's* the one whom the lawyer is to love if he is to gain the life he seeks. The one whom the lawyer and his friends have traditionally rejected as worthless and untouchable is precisely the one who can bring healing to the lawyer's brokenness. The one who is powerless in society is the one who has real power in eternity. The one from whom the lawyer has been estranged is precisely the one with whom the lawyer must restore a loving relationship if he is to gain eternal life.

God will restore the quality that's been missing from our lives when we restore our relationships with those we have excluded from our lives, people we have excluded especially in the name of our faith. That's the reconciliation God is working out among us. The psalmist imagined it long ago when he raised a vision of God's new city, the new Jerusalem, in which God will include even Egypt (Rahab) and Babylon as native citizens, even the historic enemies of God's people as brothers and sisters (Ps. 87).

Our relationship with God will be made whole when our relationships with those whom we reject have been made whole. The quality of life we call "eternal" is not far away. It's as close as that person, or those people, from whom we have allowed ourselves to become separated. Eternal life does not depend upon adhering to rules that establish or maintain boundaries between people – the saved and the unsaved, the worthy and the worthless; it depends upon our restoring relationships that have been broken, tearing down walls that we have erected in the name of what we call holy.

Too often faith, the core values around which we order our lives, has created barriers between people, becoming the rationale for estrangement, hatred, even war. But it's not really our faith that does that; it is our perversion of faith. To whatever degree we are separated from others, we are separated from God. To be fully reconciled with God, to gain the life we seek, we must be fully reconciled with our neighbors, *all* of them, especially those we might otherwise want to keep at some safe distance. Only then will we truly live.

Where do you need to work for reconciliation in your life? From whom have you become alienated? Who is the neighbor you've rejected as worthless because of some betrayal or offense? Is it another ethnic group or political party or faith tradition you think of as worthless? Where have we allowed our interpretation of rules about right and wrong behavior, even rules we think of as faithful and godly, to stand as a barrier in our relationship with others? Where do we need to work for reconciliation rather than victory in our public life, nationally and internationally? Who, after all, is our neighbor?