

Repenting Our Inaction

Luke 10:25-37

Farmville Baptist Church

April 3, 2022

Have you heard this story before – the story of the Good Samaritan? I'm not surprised if you are pretty familiar with it; it's a fairly well-known story of Jesus even among people who are not followers of Jesus. After all, this is a story about one of that most universal of human questions: who is my neighbor? Who we call "neighbor" and how we treat them is, of course, a significant question; is a neighbor simply the person who lives next to you, or the person who you sit next to at the office, or the person who has a regular tee time on the same afternoon you regularly do? Or is a neighbor something more, something broader?

I said it was a significant question because, well, who we treat as a neighbor is a pretty loaded question. I doubt many Ukrainians think of Vladimir Putin as a neighbor, or at least as a good neighbor, right now. Sometimes, the color of someone's skin, or the political party they voted for, or the way they worship God, or even which football or basketball or other sports team they root for determines whether we consider them our neighbor or not – and it affects how we treat them and they treat us. I think it is telling that, when he was developing a television program for influencing children in a healthy way, Fred Rogers focused a lot of attention on being a good, welcoming, and big-hearted neighbor. Who  our neighbor ^{is} and what that requires of us, matters a great deal.

It mattered a great deal to the man asking Jesus questions in our Scripture passage today, as well. An expert

in the law, a biblical scholar, came to Jesus one day and asked what was a standard theological question of the day: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” This was a shorthand way of figuring out where Jesus stood in the grand scheme of Jewish spiritual and intellectual debate. It was a way of asking, “What is really the core of the teachings of God?” In reply, Jesus answered with a question, turning it back on his questioner. “What does the Law say?” Jesus asked. In other words, “You yourself have an informed opinion on this – how do you understand it?” The man responded with what we call the Greatest Commandment: “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, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Jesus agreed with the man and, it seems, turned to go. But the man stopped him. We’re told he had some deeper

question, some burning, niggling thought in his mind that he wanted to have answered. “But he wanted to justify himself,” we are told, so he asked, “And who is my neighbor?”

Oh, what ~~reasons~~ lies behind that question! Is the man in a dispute with the family next to him over some land? Is he having to deal with an annoying or angry person who keeps bothering him and who he wants to tell off? Is he looking for permission to pick and choose who he offers his neighborly affections? Has he treated someone poorly and wants to be reassured that he is ok in doing so? Or has he stood silently by while someone else – maybe someone he considers unlike him or lesser than him – has been hurt or dehumanized? We don’t know exactly what lies behind the man’s question, but we know he is asking this question with an agenda, because the man wants to be justified, confirmed,

in something he has done, or maybe something he has failed to do.

In reply, Jesus doesn't reassure or reject him, giving a short answer of definitive terminology. Instead, Jesus tells a story.

The story itself is familiar enough to us: a man is beaten up by robbers and left in the ditch. A priest comes by and does nothing, avoiding the obviously distressed victim. So does a Levite, one of the worship assistants in the Temple. But a Samaritan coming by – someone different than the man in the ditch, the man asking the question, and the disciples listening in – this Samaritan stops, washes the man's wounds, carried him on his donkey to an inn, paid for care and lodging, and pledged to follow up with more financial care. It's easy to see who is acting like a neighbor here in the story; even the religious scholar can admit that it

is the Samaritan man, the one who met the needs of the victim of robbery and assault, who was a neighbor in what he did. You, Jesus tells his questioner, must “go and do likewise.”

Easy to say. Hard to accept. Even harder to live out. I wonder, sometimes, what happened to that religious scholar. Would he go away, upset, because Jesus didn't justify his prejudices or his fear and paranoia or his inaction towards those in need? Or would he repent, be changed, and become more like the Samaritan? I don't know.

But what I do know is that, far too often, I'm not like the Samaritan in the story. I'm like the priest and the Levite, walking by those in need on the other side, finding some excuse to ignore the pain and suffering of those in the ditch, ignoring the cries of those who cry out for help. And I know a lot of other people in the churches I've been in and known

about who have done that, too, looking for justification for doing nothing, or at least very little, in the face of human need.

In short, we're looking for permission to not be neighbors to others. Or, rather, we're looking to justify it.

You see, that's what the Levite and the priest in the story were doing – justifying their inaction. I've heard preachers talk about how priests had to remain ceremonially clean to participate in the sacrifices in the Temple, and I've read Sunday school lessons that talk about how the Levite had to rush by to get to Temple in time for the religious services to start. Of course, there is no evidence in Jesus' story that either of those conditions would apply; the priest was heading "down" the road – which meant he was leaving Jerusalem to go back to his hometown. We don't know exactly which way the Levite was going. But even if both the

priest and the Levite were rushing to get to ceremonial duties in the Temple, the Law of Moses gives no permission for either of them to ignore the needs of a defenseless man bleeding out in a ditch. Indeed, as scholar Amy Jill-Levine comments, neither Jesus nor Luke “gives the priest or the Levite an excuse. Nor would any excuse be acceptable. Their responsibility [shared by every faithful person in Jewish thought] was to save a life; they failed.”¹ The scholar questioning Jesus was looking for justification to treat people as something other than neighbor – but this story provides none. Instead, it is a call for that man, just like the priest and the Levite, to repent – because, just like the priest and the Levite, he has a call to treat others as neighbors.

Of course, there is another possibility at work here in the priest and Levite in the story, and likely in the religious

¹ Amy Jill-Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 94.

teacher questioning Jesus. It may even be a possibility at work within us. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., famously referenced it in what would prove to be his final sermon. As Dr. King articulated it, “the first question that the Levite asked was, ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’”² Who among us hasn’t seen someone in need, someone under attack, some one or some group ostracized because of who they are, what they look like, where they’re from, or how other people think about them and wondered, “If I help them, what will people think? What will it cost me? Could I be pulled down in the ditch with them? Will the robbers come back for me? Will acting like a neighbor cost me more than I want to give?”

I am fully aware that being a neighbor to others, especially those in need, is not always easy, not always

² Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I See the Promised Land,” in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 285

comfortable, not always something we want to do. It's much easier to stay away from those claims on our lives, to keep our windows rolled up, to keep our eyes facing forward or cast to the ground, to leave the man in the ditch and pretend like he's not there...walking past a little faster to get by him sooner. It's not always comfortable to form friendships, true friendships, with people of another race or another language or another religion, especially when they face more disadvantages or discrimination than we do in life and would benefit from our voices of support. We don't always want to insert ourselves into situations where anger or fear or hatred or misunderstanding leads to people created in the image of God lying bleeding in a ditch. It's easier to stand to the side or walk right past. It's more comfortable not to act.

My friends, when we do this, when we don't treat others, especially those in need, as our neighbors by not acting

towards them as neighbors would act, we need to repent.

And I'm preaching first of all to me, because I have done this and I do this. It hit home for me back in 2020, in the wake of renewed concerns over racial injustice. In the larger conversation about these ongoing disparities, I began to hear from Black friends and colleagues and acquaintances, listening to their lived experiences of discrimination and pain and neglect and outright targeted hatred. One friend I knew well from grade school shared his own encounters with racial bigotry in our hometown as a five- and six-year-old and, later, as a teenager. We were friends then, classmates, and practically neighbors – but I didn't know any of this was going on...or, rather, I chose not to acknowledge it. I hadn't lived it, I hadn't experienced it, and so I was content to act like all was well. I didn't really understand then why he had this chip on his shoulder sometimes in our later school years,

why he started to withdraw from me and from other white kids at school. I didn't see his struggle, and the struggle of others, and in those moments when I did see, I didn't do anything about it.

I remember another friend in middle and high school, a bandmate. This friend was a smart and sweet guy, but he didn't fit in socially all that well. As you can expect, this drew a good amount of ridicule and teasing, and it was evident that facing this every day led to frustration and pain on his part. I did not join in the teasing or the ridicule – but I didn't try to stop it, either. I didn't stand up for my friend. I didn't seek him out to spend time with him at lunch or outside of class. I didn't act as a neighbor to him. And he wasn't the only one. ^{have} I failed to live out the second part of the Great Commandment to many people in my life. I failed to act as a neighbor to them.

So, you see, I need to repent. And I imagine that you do, too.

In his final sermon, Dr. King challenged his listeners to consciously choose to move from the perspective of the priest and the Levite to the compassionate heart of the Samaritan. He said, “Then the Good Samaritan came by. And he reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’ [...] That’s the question.”³ Indeed, that is the question that Jesus poses to the religious teacher he encountered that day, and it’s the question he poses to us, as well. We know, very well, that the way of Jesus, the command of God, is to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. But far too often, like the expert in the law, we are looking for justification to narrow down that category, to bless our inaction and our failure to let our compassion for

³ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I See the Promised Land,” in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 285

others move us to respond. Jesus leaves us with no justification, none at all; instead, he gives us a clear directive: “Go and do likewise.” Go and be like the Good Samaritan, ready to bind up the wounds of those suffering and serving those we meet who are in need – and recognizing that this might just mean opening our eyes wider and broadening the reach of our compassion. *and doing something uncomfortable or costly.*

Today, as a first step, I want to invite you to join me at the cross, because I need to repent of my inaction. I imagine we all need to repent of our inaction in some area of life.

Who is the person you haven't stood up for, or supported, or shown care and love towards? Who is the person you regard with indifference or even contempt because of who they are or what they might ask of you? Who is in pain that you don't step forward to support because you're afraid of what it might cost you, or what it might cause you to confront, or

what other people might think of you? Who have you and I hurt by our inaction – and how can we take the first step towards repentance, reconciliation, and a renewed commitment to the neighbor-love of Christ? What inaction do we need to repent of today?

Reflection Questions

- When have you seen someone in pain or suffering and you ignored their need? Why?
- Has someone ever helped you at a cost to themselves? What was that experience like?
- Who is someone (or some group of people) suffering that God has made you aware of? How can you help?