

Sermon: Luke 10:25-37

Faith Evangelical Free Church (10.30.16)

Title: Lessons from the Parable of the Good Samaritan

Introduction

This morning I'd like to begin by asking you how you might answer the question, "who is my neighbor?"

What memories, people, places, or events come to mind?

For me, every time I think of who has been a neighbor in my life, I cannot stop myself from recalling the memory of my childhood best friend and I standing in my mother's flower beds, singing songs we'd made up and strumming guitars we'd made out of rubber bands and plastic baby wipe boxes.

I also think about those who I have helped and who have helped me. I think about the young mother whose last-ditch attempt to find help I stumbled upon while searching for a couch on craigslist, and how my friends and I pooled some money together to give to her as a gift. I was so nervous to go and be nice to a woman I'd never met before that I had to take my mom along for encouragement and support (and because you just don't do anything involving craigslist by yourself).

I think about the countless times I've had to ask strangers for a jump start, friends and family for financial support, or the handful of times I've reached into my wallet to pay for my coffee only to be told that the customer before me has already purchased my drink. And I think about how thankful I am for those acts of kindness and demonstrations of love in my life.

Sometimes I also think about those who I chose not to help, who I passed by, who I hoped and prayed would find the help they needed...just not from me. (And I wonder if I made the right decision)

"Who is my neighbor" can be a nostalgic question, an inspiring question, a call to action, or sometimes, if we're being honest with ourselves, the opening argument to rationalize inaction.

Jesus was once asked the question, "Who is my neighbor" and in response he shared what is arguably his most famous parable, the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

It is a story I'm sure many of you have heard or are at least familiar with, and have in one way or another tried to apply its generally accepted moral teaching, "be kind to others" to your life and relationships.

But what's interesting about the parable of the Good Samaritan is that while Jesus teaches it as a response to the question, "who is my neighbor" he never actually provides a direct answer.

Instead, he encourages us not to look upon the world and wonder, "who is it I am supposed help", but rather "how it that I can be of help?" How can I be a loving neighbor to someone in need today?

That is the question we'll be seeking to understand as we engage in God's word this morning.

Beginning in the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 10, Verse 25 we read (Read: Luke 10:25-29)

*him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do
What is written in the Law? How do you read
the Lord your God with all your heart and with
all your mind, and your neighbor as
yourself? answered correctly; do this, and you will live."
Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*

The Lawyer and Jesus (vv. 25-29)

Our passage begins with a guy seemingly blindsiding Jesus with the fairly significant question, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

Luke tells us that the man testing Jesus was a lawyer, meaning he was scribe and an expert in Jewish Law, or what we today call the Old Testament. This man would have spent every day writing copies of the Old Testament and offering interpretations of the more difficult passages.

It's hard to say for sure whether this man was really seeking to have a conversation with Jesus, or just wanted to catch him off guard and prove him wrong.

On the one hand, Luke (the author of the Gospel) tells that the lawyer stood before Jesus and addressed him as “Teacher” -- both of which were signs of honor and respect in their culture.

However, the fact that Luke described the lawyer’s question as a way of “testing” Jesus is troubling -- throughout the first 10 chapters of this Gospel different Jewish leaders from a group known as the Pharisees have already tried to trap Jesus in tests and questions designed to discredit him, to prove him and his teachings as fraudulent.

Jewish scribes and lawyers worked very closely with the Pharisees, and many of them had already expressed their displeasure with what they felt were Jesus’ new teachings regarding God’s will -- such as the command to love your enemies, or the promise that the poor, meek, and powerless would one day be the ones to inherit the earth.

So although the lawyer’s question is a good one, capable of drawing out a rich and meaningful discussion, his motivation for questioning Jesus was likely less about his desire to learn and more about hoping to make Jesus look bad.

Jesus decides to respond to the lawyer’s challenge, but doesn’t immediately give an answer. Instead, he turns the question back to the lawyer and says, “you’re the expert, you tell me”

The lawyer doesn’t miss a beat, and quickly rattles off the textbook answer, quoting from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18

It calls for those who claim to love God to follow him with their entire being -- their desires, affections, will, intellect -- everything you are was to be devoted to loving and being obedient to God.

The lawyer’s second quotation, from Leviticus 19:18, commands us to love our neighbors -- to offer them honor, respect, aid, and hospitality.

The lawyer really could not have answered the question any better. Throughout the four Gospels Jesus himself teaches the very same ideas -- that we are to love God and love others -- which is why Jesus affirms his response. He says, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

If it had been the lawyer’s intention to expose Jesus for teaching and believing something other than what was traditionally accepted as true, then his first question hadn’t done the trick.

So, he presses further and asks, “And who is my neighbor?”

This was a far more difficult question because the Jews at this time in history had a very narrow definition of who qualified as being their “neighbor.”

The passage the lawyer had cited before about God’s command to love your neighbor as yourself (Lev 19:18) had been commonly interpreted to apply only to fellow Jews and those who lived peaceably among Jews.

Basically, the lawyer’s answer to this question would have been “my neighbor is anyone who is like me or anyone who likes me” -- anyone else he would have felt justified in denying help, in showing no love.

For Jesus -- a man who had already built an infamous reputation by dining with sinners, conversing with tax collectors, defending, blessing and forgiving prostitutes and embracing all manner of marginalized people -- for Jesus, a narrow understanding of who should be your neighbor simply wouldn't do.

As the story he tells will show, the question “and who is my neighbor” when asked with the purpose of dividing the world into lists of who you love and who don’t wasn’t even valid.

Instead, Jesus tried to teach the lawyer, just as he tries to teach you and me, that our love for neighbors starts with understanding ourselves as neighbors to those in need.

The Parable (Read Luke 10:30-37)

The victim in Jesus’ story is a man traveling on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho -- this road really existed, and it really was extremely dangerous. People got beat up, robbed, and murdered all the time traveling across its 15 miles and among its steep cliffs.

We get no details about the man who is robbed -- and that’s important to Jesus’ goal with this story.

Remember, the lawyer's question "who is my neighbor" is predicated on the belief that we're required love some people, and some people we can ignore.

The man who is in desperate need in this story cannot be identified -- he robbed off all possessions, and stripped of any clothing that might have given a passerby a hint as to who he was or what people he belonged to.

Anyone who decided to help this man would have to do so based not on whether or not the man was on the list of acceptable neighbors, but the reality of his need.

Jesus brings two religious professionals into his story, and shockingly neither so much as says a prayer for the man who is so clearly in need.

From an ethical standpoint, there can be no question that to leave someone beaten and dying in a ditch is morally wrong.

And Jesus does not give any details as to why these two men did this -- culturally there could have been any number of excuses that would have been deemed acceptable. The priest and the levite might have had temple responsibilities and needed to remain ritually pure. Touching the nearly dead body of an unidentifiable stranger could have prevented them from doing their jobs. They were in a hurry. They couldn't spare the time.

But when we ask the question, "were these men a neighbor to the one in need", all excuses fall short. In their hearts they were just not willing to do what needed to be done, to love their neighbor as they themselves would want to be loved.

Jesus continues his story,

A Samaritan comes upon our fallen victim, and Jesus' lesson goes from a theological debate to an absolute scandal. The Jews and the Samaritans hated each other -- deep, dark, racially, religiously, and geographical driven hatred.

The Jews considered the Samaritans racially impure and members of illegitimate sect that falsely claimed to worship a perverted understanding of God.

The Samaritans thought the Jews were heretics and rejected any Old Testament writing other than the Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

For the Jewish lawyer there would have been no one more unacceptable to think of as a neighbor than a Samaritan.

And yet...that's exactly who Jesus uses to make his point.

If we ask the question, "Was the Samaritan a good neighbor? Did he find someone in need and love him as he would himself wish to be loved?" The only answer we can give is -- yes, of course he did. He showed the beaten and robbed man incredible love and demonstrated what it means to be a loving neighbor in four ways:

First, the Samaritan was willing to cross any potential unloving boundaries. It did not matter that he couldn't identify with the man in need, that he couldn't confirm whether or not he was a friend or an enemy. He did not allow prejudice or personal opinion to dictate whether or not he would help the wounded man. When he saw the man lying there half dead on the side of the road he saw only a human being in need of a loving neighbor.

Second, he took advantage of the everyday opportunity to help someone in need. The Samaritan hadn't gone out to start a mission or organize a group to rescue robbed and beaten travelers. Both of those things would have been excellent, but Jesus' story is about one person finding another in need in the course of everyday life, and refusing to let the person in need suffer alone.

Third, the Samaritan experienced compassion that led him to take action. Compassion is an extremely powerful biblical word. It's more than having pity or sympathy for someone; it's feeling compelled to enter into their burden, to suffer alongside, and then to walk with them as they seek to be raised out from under that which has brought them down.

Fourth, the Samaritan accepted that when helping others, there will be costs. This is often an unavoidable reality -- when you help someone, something is given, something is sacrificed.

The costs for the Samaritan were some of his material resources (the wine, oil, and bandages), his own comfort (he gave up his donkey), his time, and of course his money. He accepted all these costs as a worthy price of helping another, of being a neighbor.

As Jesus finishes his story, he asks the lawyer a new question, and the lawyer responds:

Jesus never answers the lawyer's original question -- instead, he changes the perspective. Figuring out who your neighbor is, who you should help, who you should love, is not a matter of evaluating the worthiness of others -- it's a condition of your own heart. You must be the kind of person who is willing to say to those in need, "I am your neighbor, and I'd love to help."

Jesus' last words in this passage are the only imperative command in the whole story -- You, go, and do likewise. The command was for the lawyer, but it was for you and me as well.

How can we "go, and do likewise" -- how can you and I strive to say to those in need, "I am your neighbor, and I'd love to help"? What might it look like if we tried to demonstrate love as the Samaritan did in this parable?

Consider what unloving boundaries you might need to cross or overcome.

Do you struggle with racial reconciliation? Is it difficult for you to love and help those with either more or less money than you? If someone has a different faith than your own do you think you'd pass by on the other side of the road when they are hurting, when they need a friend?

This is a huge area of growth for most people, and cannot be overcome by strength or will alone -- it requires the love and transformative power of God.

If you want to be a neighbor to people who look and act and think differently than you, then I'd encourage you to first spend some time praying for God to grant you a softer heart and the ability to look on the world with his eyes.

You might also explore some opportunities to meet and get to know people from contexts different than your own.

Head over to the Jardine Apartment Complex on a Friday night and help the Bike Night ministry repair and give away bikes for international students, and while you're there ask God to help you learn and listen to the incredible array of people and cultures we have the opportunity to create community with right here in Manhattan.

Invite a friend to join Alpha and enjoy a few evenings of open and honest conversations about what it means to have faith, to believe in something greater than yourself.

Go for a prayer walk in a neighborhood other than your own, and ask God to reveal to you the needs of the people on that street, and maybe even lead you to someone you could talk to.

Unloving boundaries are crossed one step at time, but doing so does require that first step.

Take advantage of everyday opportunities to help those in need.

One of the craziest promises Jesus ever made was that we would be able to do great things for other people, even greater than some of the things he did on earth, if we loved him. In Ephesians 2:10 the apostle Paul wrote that "We are God's handiwork, created in Christ to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Chances are pretty good that you are Jesus' plan to help someone right here in Manhattan, right here in your own community, your own street, your own home. You don't have to be part of some incredible organization or be an international missionary to find the least of these and love them in the name of Jesus. If you're willing to keep your eyes up and your heart open, you be a loving neighbor to those in need as part of your day-to-day life.

As you walked in this morning you may have noticed some bins in the foyer for collecting winter coats. The USD 383 FIT closet, which serves homeless children and families in need in Manhattan, is trying to get ready for winter so they can give away coats to kids who don't have one. When you go home later, look around for any extra coats, and bring them back next Sunday and put them in the bin. If you have a few extra bucks, grab a new coat from Walmart this week.

I should also note that the opportunities that come your way won't only be about providing material needs. Sometimes you might get the chance to offer words of encouragement to

someone who needs to be lifted up, or allow someone the chance to vent after a hard day at work.

Taking advantage of your everyday opportunities to serve and love others really comes down to not ignoring or rejecting people by when you see they are hurting, when you can tell they need a friend. Don't pass by on the other side of the road. You might very well be the person God created to share his love those you meet who are searching for love.

Let your compassion lead you to take action.

In his book "Dirty Faith" author David Nowell speaks to the depth and power of compassion as we seek to serve those in need: **"Compassion is based on the recognition that we are all in this together. Compassion grows out of God-given and God-sanctioned love and demands a lifestyle of engagement, a conscious choice about consumption and generosity, a refusal to see those in need as [just] "other." It means moving beyond our places of comfort and encountering a world that is dirty, ugly, and often painful."**

Compassion is that feeling in your gut when you know you've seen something wrong, someone being treated in a way that is not the way God wants them to be treated, and you feel a desire to get involved, to help, to do something.

In the parable it was the Samaritan's compassion that led him to stop and help the man in need, to bind his wounds, to take the action necessary to be a loving neighbor and meet the need before him.

My encouragement to you this morning is to not only be the kind of person who has compassion for others -- which is a wonderful and righteous feeling to have -- but also to be the kind of person whose compassion grows into loving action, who demonstrates care, who lets others know by your love that you are loved by God.

Accept that there will be costs.

Whether it is your time, your money, your resources, or your energy...helping someone will mostly likely require giving something up. Caring for others often, if not always, requires a sacrifice from those providing the care.

I don't want to belittle the difficulty of accepting the costs of caring for others -- the sacrifices we make in order to help our neighbors are often exhausting and can leave us feeling empty or even like our generosity has been taken for granted.

Whenever I find myself feeling like this, I try to remind myself of who Jesus said we're really serving when we help someone in need.

His words from Matthew 25 are probably more often quoted in the negative -- "whatever you did not do for the least of these, you didn't do for me" -- which is true. But before that warning, he gave us the incredibly beautiful promise about what happens when we love our neighbors, when we help those in need:

"[34]...Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. [35] For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, [36] I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' [37] Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? [38] And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? [39] And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' [40] And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' (Matthew 25:34-40)

Conclusion

A few months ago I read an incredible story about a neighborhood coming together to help a woman Anne Glancey.

Anne's house was in a state of desperate disrepair -- paint was peeling away from every wall of the exterior, the lawn overgrown with 3-foot high grass, and an abandoned 1984 Plymouth rusting in the driveway, unused and immovable for years.

Anne had not meant to let the upkeep of her home get so far out of hand, but her age, limited income, and the physical labor needed to correct the problems prevented her from being able to do anything on her own, and she felt badly about asking others for help.

Then, in June, Anne received a letter from the town informing her that she'd be charged no less than \$3000 a day until she corrected the numerous code violations that were deemed unacceptable under a new Neighborhood Improvement Program.

Shaken and upset, Anne called a Adam and Kristin Polhemus -- a young couple that had moved into her neighborhood a few years earlier, befriended her, and had on multiple occasions offered to help her with some repairs. She told them about the violations and fines, and worked up the courage to say, "I don't know what I am going to do, I can't do this myself."

Adam and Kristin responded: "Anne, we care about you, and we'll help you get this fixed."

Over the next six days volunteers from the their church and members from the neighborhood worked on Anne's home, free of charge.

The house was scraped, primed, and painted; the foundation and flooring were shored up; the side porch was repaired; the lawn was tamed; the junked Plymouth was hauled away.

In less than a week every violation has been remedied and the fines revoked.

As this story gained national attention more and more reporters called Adam and Kristin, each time asking the same question: why did you decide to help Anne? What motivated you to do so much for her?

And, each time, they gave the same answer:

"In life, we are called to love our neighbor as ourselves. We wanted to help Anne out of an act of love. We do hope that everyone who [hears our story] will take a look at their own neighborhoods with a new set of eyes. What needs fixing? Who needs a friend or companion? How can you help? Your neighbors are just family members you don't know that well yet, and the relationship starts with you. I can't promise it will be easy, but I can promise it will be worth it."

In the words of our Savior, Jesus Christ, my hope and prayer is that this week we might all "go, and do likewise" -- that we would all seek to be a neighbor to those in need of love and care.