

Who Are You FOR?

It Takes A Village | Fresh Perspectives

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I'd like to start today's message with a land acknowledgement. The land we are on is home first to our Indigenous neighbours, the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples. This land is covered by the Dish With One Spoon Treaty. We as settlers unfairly took control of their land and caused a lot of hurt. It is now our responsibility to do the work of reconciliation.

For today's message, we are going to read from the book of Luke. The book of Luke is actually a letter for the early church that outlines the events in the life of Jesus and his ministry, as recorded by a medical doctor. It is a narrative that shares the start of the Christian movement.

Many of us may already be familiar with today's story and I hope that we can gain a new perspective together.

Let's start by reading from Luke 10: 25-37.

“Just then a religion scholar stood up with a question to test Jesus. “Teacher, what do I need to do to get eternal life?” He answered, “What’s written in God’s Law? How do you interpret it?” He said, “That you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence—and that you love your neighbor as well as you do yourself.” “Good answer!” said Jesus. “Do it and you’ll live.” Looking for a loophole, he asked, “And just how would you define ‘neighbor’?” Jesus answered by telling a story. “There was once a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. On the way he was attacked by robbers. They took his clothes, beat him up, and went off leaving him half-dead.

Luckily, a priest was on his way down the same road, but when he saw him he angled across to the other side. Then a Levite religious man showed up; he also avoided the injured man. “A Samaritan traveling the road came on him. When he saw the man’s condition, his heart went out to him. He gave him first aid, disinfecting and bandaging his wounds. Then he lifted him onto his donkey, led him to an inn, and made him comfortable. In the morning he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take good care of him. If it costs any more, put it on my bill—I’ll pay you on my way back.’ “What do you think? Which of the three became a neighbor to the man attacked by robbers?” “The one who treated him kindly,” the religion scholar responded. Jesus said, “Go and do the same.””

To fully understand the weight of Jesus' story, we must appreciate the relationship between Jews and Samaritans. Simply put, they hated each other. Samaritans were half Jew, half Gentile and Jews did not associate with them because they weren't "pure". In today's day,

this can simply be referred to as racism - seeing another race or ethnic group as inferior to your own.

Their religious beliefs and practices differed significantly. Most often, when a Jew had to travel through Samaria to get to their destination, they would opt to go around, even if it took significantly longer. So, in the story of the good neighbour, the use of a dying Jew and a compassionate Samaritan was simply radical all on its own.

Now, the first two men in the story to pass by the dying Jew were a Priest and a Levite. These two men would have been from the same religious sect, but in very different positions of authority. Religion scholars believe that they were both likely on their way to the temple to serve. In their religious law, they were obligated to help an injured person unless the person was dead.

If they helped someone injured to this extent—and they turned out to be dead—they'd be ceremonially unclean and would not be permitted to worship in the temple. They would have had to return home, go through a purification process and wait to be called back to the temple to serve, which would probably take at least a year. As for the Levite, some scholars even believe that he first watched the Priest's reaction and then followed suit as the Priest would have been his leader or religious authority figure.

As for the religion scholars and Pharisees who posed this question to Jesus, they were intending to trap him for saying something false. The text even said they were looking for a loophole. They were not genuinely interested in hearing what it would take to be a good neighbour. These men would have been Jewish members to a religious party that ascribed to hundreds of legal traditions and rules, both from Jewish law as well as traditions that would have been passed down from those before them. These scholars and experts of Jewish law would have been the men who people turned to for clarity on these hundreds of rules and genuinely looked up to.

They were often seen and regarded as holy men who pursued the highest standard of purity. Yet often Jesus's interactions with many of them reveal that they could be quite harsh and legalistic, often missing the heart behind the original laws that God gave.

Once Jesus had described the three different men - the Priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan, he ended by addressing their question with a question. Classic Jesus-fashion. You can look at many other stories of Jesus and he does the same thing. Answering a question with a question. How helpful, right? Let's recall what it was that he asked. He said, ***"What do you think? Which of the three became a neighbor to the man attacked by robbers?"*** Jesus changed the question entirely. In his story, Jesus didn't seek to address who your neighbour is, instead he paints the picture of what a good neighbour does. I'll say that again, Jesus changed the question entirely. In his story he didn't seek to address who your neighbour is, instead he paints the picture of what a good neighbour does.

Jesus defines a neighbour as anyone you come in contact with, regardless of race, beliefs, status, opinions, or anything else that can cause division. The way he describes a neighbour is by coming alongside someone. In verse 37 when he asks who became a neighbour the answer Jesus received was ***“The one who treated him kindly.”*** For clarity-sake, I’ve come prepared with this answer from a few other translations of the bible - (NLT) ***“the one who showed mercy”***, (NASB) ***“the one who showed compassion”***, (AMP) ***“the one who showed compassion and mercy.”***

So, according to the bible, it appears that a neighbour is someone who comes alongside someone and actively engages in kindness, compassion and mercy. Throughout the book of Luke, Jesus is challenging religious rule-keeping. We see it time and time again when people ask for clarity or miss the mark. He used people of varying cultures, beliefs, status, opinions, gender and obvious purity (or lack thereof) to demonstrate that his love crosses all divides as a self-sacrificial kind of love. Love takes root when it is lived out in difficult and uncomfortable situations. It seems to me that, when our faith holds us back from loving like Jesus calls us to and from being a neighbour like Jesus describes, we need to pump the brakes and hard! When our faith is what holds us back from being love with skin on, we need to re-evaluate and be open, and dare I say - even eager, to having our understanding challenged and changed.

Ultimately, I think we are each called to be known for who we’re for, rather than what we’re against—actively engaging in kindness, compassion and mercy instead of protecting the “purity” of our ideals, beliefs or convictions. Let that sink in. We are each called to be known for who we’re for, rather than what we’re against. Maybe this is what the Golden Rule looks like when it is truly lived out.

We have ‘neighbour’ opportunities all around us constantly, each and every day. They may be people near to us or, like in Jesus’s story, someone we happen to cross paths with. We don’t get to pick and choose who we show kindness, compassion and mercy to. Often it can be a significant challenge. Being a neighbour might even cause people to do a double take. Like the model that Jesus provides us, I think being a neighbour requires our relationship, our time and our resources. In the story of the good neighbour, the Samaritan entered into relationship with the half-dead Jew by providing first aid and comfort. When I recall my first aid training, we were taught to introduce ourselves, ask for consent and then provide help. I would assume the Samaritan may have gone as far as to learn this dying Jew’s name and talk to him to soothe him.

This also took time, the Samaritan likely went out of his way from where he was headed to deliver the Jew to a nearby inn. He did not have the luxury of calling an uber or an ambulance. He traveled with this man by donkey. I can only imagine how awkward and uncomfortable that would have been. This also required the Samaritan’s resources - his money. He paid for the Jew to be housed and cared for in his absence and committed to any additional costs as needed. As I reflect on my neighbouring experiences, both the ones where I fell short of Jesus’s standard as well as those that went well, I have found that my faith framework has changed. I used to have the mentality of the Priest and Levite where I felt like there were rules that I had to live within and boxes to check off in order to be seen as a good Christian girl. But, my

understanding changed drastically when I first began volunteering at and working at the homeless shelter in our St. Catharines location. I continually found myself in circumstances and relationships that stretched my thinking and stretched my heart. This heart transformation happened when I chose to invest my relationship, time and resources into this community as well as opportunities that I came upon in my day to day.

Of course, there are certainly circumstances that require healthy boundaries. There is a difference between inconvenient or challenging versus unsafe or inappropriate. I believe we are given the discernment to know the difference. But, I also believe that our first reaction should never be to look for the loophole. Often, I think unity and diversity can be two very polarizing ideals, and difficult to hold together. But, the work of love seeks to draw people together rather than force us farther apart.

Later on in the next chapter, Luke 11:52, Jesus is reprimanding the Pharisees on another matter regarding purity and religious rule keeping. Another instance where they missed the point and Jesus says to them

“...You took the key of knowledge, but instead of unlocking doors, you locked them.”

Is our faith locking others out, or is our faith drawing others in? Are we quick to come up with reasons or rules or even theology that gives us the excuse we need to stand back rather than roll up our sleeves and help out? Or, by knowing stories like these that reveal the true heart of God, are we actively putting ourselves in circumstances and relationships that can expand the reach of love?

As I begin to close, I want us to take time to reflect on this story and how it plays out in our lives. I believe we are a church that wants to live like the Samaritan in today's story. I believe we are people who truly seek to share God's love and use our lives as testimony. This isn't always easy. It is usually messy, uncomfortable and can come with a whole lot of grey area. I think it's also interesting in the story that the Samaritan did not have a hidden agenda. He didn't shove his beliefs, opinions, judgements or preferences on the dying Jew. He didn't put conditions on his willingness to help. He saw a need and he did all that he could to make things right.

So, who are the dying neighbours in your life that you can love and unlock doors for? Not necessarily those who you feel the need to change or win over. Instead, those who could simply use a friend or even a compassionate or merciful interaction.

Maybe it is a literal neighbour that doesn't respect noise restrictions or lacks care for their property or yours? How could you choose to live in harmony with them, rather than causing or engaging in disputes? Do you have a coworker or employer that is in need of support or encouragement? Perhaps they've really dropped the ball lately or are quick to let their temper get the best of them. How can you be a neighbour to them, especially in those trying or heated moments? What about some of the ongoing hot button issues that we see on the news and in

our communities? The people or person that finds themselves on the other end of the spectrum of opinions around things like mask mandates, vaccination statuses or even stances on the freedom convoy. How can you be a neighbour to those who disagree with you? This one may seem simple but, you may have the opportunity to be a neighbour to the next customer service representative that you speak with about a bill or shipment that was incorrect for the third time. These people often face a lot of mistreatment for things that usually weren't even personally their fault to begin with.

Perhaps we need to shift our reflection to ways of social media and the growing default to cancel culture. Maybe the dying neighbour in this scenario requires more support and compassion for people and less promotion of canceling out on ideas.

And finally, here's one more possibly to prompt your reflection. Perhaps you may feel the responsibility to be a neighbour to our Indigenous neighbours. People who are truly deserving of our long overdue action for truth and reconciliation since we as settlers contributed to a lot of the pain and loss that they have suffered.

I hope you can take some time to identify who some of the dying neighbours in your life are that could use some of your compassion and kindness through your relationship, time and resources. It will require a lot of intentionality, but I trust it will be worth it.

Let's pray. _