

Pastor Liz Kuglin Alyea's Sermon for July 13, 2025

Neighbour?

I always have one of those “throw-back” moments whenever I preach this passage from Luke’s gospel. As a brand-new seminarian it was the text for my very first sermon. And herein lies the irony: I had recently wrapped up my law practice to go to seminary and seek ordination. And there, right in front of me, were these words, “*A lawyer stood up to test Jesus.*” I don’t remember much about that first sermon. It’s stashed away in a banker’s box in a storage locker. I might reread it some day. But I know this: I have learned some things in the ensuing 38 years: not to test Jesus but to trust Jesus; not to listen in a way that what he says goes in one ear and out the other, but to hear with my heart; and, having heard, not to just to reflect on Jesus’ words, but to act on them.

Not to test Jesus but to trust him. Lawyers are always testing by asking questions. How? Why? When? Where? How? It’s drilled into us at law school that there’s my truth and your truth and the truth. Accordingly, lawyers test the evidence. We challenge the witness, much like the lawyer who stood up to test Jesus! We’re also schooled not to ask a question to which we don’t know the answer! Thus, the lawyer already knows the answer to Jesus’ question: “*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 neighbour as yourself.*” But then some arrogance creeps in. The lawyer asks, “*And just who **is** my neighbour?*” It’s a question asked in order to justify himself. But this self-justification indicates that the lawyer is in a situation where his behaviour is inconsistent with his beliefs: “*Sure, I love my neighbour...BUT.*” Justifying is about protecting one’s self-image, deflecting responsibility and avoiding blame.

It’s so easy to put ourselves first, following the impulses of our egos, as did that lawyer in confronting Jesus. However, Jesus doesn’t preach egotism. Quite the opposite. He preaches dying to oneself in order to live.

In dying to oneself, we open ourselves to the loving God who desires nothing less than that we be in a restored relationship with God, with the human family and the natural world. When Jesus is tested in the wilderness does he challenge the tempter? Argue a case against greed, wealth and power? Try to outwit his tester? No. Jesus refuses to be influenced by concern for his personal safety and practical interests. He trusts God. Left to our own devices, we would create our own egocentric worlds and close our hearts to the abundant life that God desires for us. Jesus teaches us to trust as he leads us along the path of self-emptying love.

Here's another thing I've learned: not to listen in a way that what Jesus says goes in one ear and out the other, but to truly hear his words deep in our hearts. He knows that we have difficulty dying to ourselves. Our egos insist on hearing what we want to hear, blocking out the deeper and more important implications of his words. He doesn't pose a rational argument, doesn't take an adversarial position. Rather, Jesus tells a story. He draws the lawyer - and us - into engaging with the characters in such a way that we lean forward to hear what happens next. We can't just let the words flow over us. We concentrate. We begin to truly hear with our hearts the message Jesus is conveying. It's a simple yet powerful story. A man is robbed and left terribly wounded on the side of the road. Two Jewish religious men, learned in the law of Moses, who should have stopped, avoid the injured man. A third man stops, gives him first aid, lifts him up on his donkey, takes him to an inn, gives the innkeeper money to care for him and promises to stop on his way back and pay whatever else is owing for the wounded man's care.

The startling reality of the story is that the third man is a Samaritan. That fact would stir up a real sense of 'other' in the lawyer for there was a religious division between Samaritans and Jews. To make a long history short, Samaritans and Jews were close relatives but the former claimed that Judaism fundamentally altered the original Israelite religion. The most notable theological difference concerned the holiest site, which the

Jews believed was the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and which Samaritans identified as Mount Gerizim. Mount Gerizim was destroyed under the ruler of Judea and led to the devastation of Samaria. These actions resulted in resentment, alienation, and the deterioration of relations between the two. And yet, the Samaritan, long regarded as the outsider, is the one who shows mercy.

A brief definition of *mercy* is “*the gift of God’s undeserved kindness and compassion towards humanity.*” The Samaritan sees the wounded man. He sees as Jesus sees and offers real care which imitates Jesus’ care which in turn reveals how God sees and God cares. In this brief story, Jesus illustrates what compassion and mercy look like and clarifies just who is the neighbour.

And now, having truly heard Jesus’ words and taken them into our hearts, we cannot merely reflect on them, but we are compelled - as is the lawyer - to act on them.

When I was at seminary, we were required to complete a term of supervised pastoral education in an institutional setting. My setting was in the local hospital under the supervision of Rev. Ken Beal. Many were afraid of Ken because he probed the depths of one’s soul in supervisory sessions and yet he did so in the kindest way, pulling us up short with his questions and giving us time to reflect deeply on our own life experiences and our calling to ministry. After every morning session, he would stand in the doorway as we left to go to our assigned wards and to each of us, as we passed him, he would say, “*Go and do likewise.*”

“*Go and do likewise*”, are the very same words by which Jesus ended his interaction with the questioning lawyer. Jesus’ story is an invitation to the lawyer - and us - to die to ourselves - to our own egos - to embody this compassion and mercy, to see our fellow human beings as God sees them, and to care for them as God cares. In doing so, Jesus pushes the question: who are the people we’d rather not help or love, and its corollary, who are the people from whom we’d rather not receive help!

What Jesus is getting at here is the breaking down in the Kingdom of God of divisions that separate human beings one from another when it comes to being neighbour and doing neighbourly acts of merciful compassion. We are challenged to hear a new truth about the kingdom of God. The lawyer has asked for boundaries over who should be considered a neighbour but Jesus refuses to set any. Instead of describing who **is** a neighbour, he illustrates how to **be** a neighbour. The lawyer's question was the wrong one. It should not have been, "*Who is my neighbour?*" but "*How do I love my neighbour?*" The Samaritan man and the two Jewish men were divided by history, culture and theology, yet Jesus declares that the obligation to see and care for humanity supersedes all our human differences and fallings-out. There are no exceptions to God's command to love. The Kingdom of God allows no such divisions.

In his response to Jesus' story, the lawyer gets the answer right, but we will never know if he followed Jesus' charge to "*Go and do likewise.*" It's our calling to finish the story with our own lives. Sometimes it will ask a lot of us and at other times, it will require a very simple response. Always it will involve us coming closer, rather than pushing away, seeing and caring for someone, who, without a doubt, is experiencing pain, struggles, challenges, and sorrows, whose needs are not being met. How do we be neighbour? Like the Samaritan, we come close and are merciful. All divisions - culture, religion, gender, race - fall away and the world according to God - the Kingdom of God - bursts through. Thanks be to God. Amen

Blessing *May the blessing of God the Father, source of life, God the + Son, word of life, and God the Holy Spirit, breath of life, surround, sustain and surprise you today and everyday. Amen*