

5th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 10, Year C
A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger
on July 13, 2025

Deuteronomy 30:9-14 / Psalm 25:1-9 / Colossians 1:1-14 / Luke 10:25-37

*Let our hearts sing to the Lord without ceasing;
O Lord our God, we will give You thanks for ever.
Amen.*

And who is my neighbor?

Every time this story of the Good Samaritan comes up, we hear a sermon asking the question *'Who is your neighbor?'* with the conclusion being that everyone is our neighbor. I have recently come to a new conclusion that *'Who is my neighbor?'* is the wrong conversation to have. It's a red herring, and it directs us away from the work of caring for our neighbors.

Let's look at 2 recent news stories:

- On July 4, Templeton Feed & Grain exploded into flames set off by fireworks and is now demolished. Many in San Luis Obispo County are shocked and horrified, expressing love and compassion for the family whose livelihood has been all but lost. Locals have been sharing their memories of the beacon that has been in the center of Templeton since 1946. Why a feed & grain business has logoed shirts and hats is beyond me, but a local deli has agreed to carry their merch, and they've had to order more because of the high demand from locals expressing their support in that way. They may not be using the term, but there is no question that Templeton Feed & Grain, the family and what they represent are our neighbors.
- The flash flooding in the Texas Hill Country on July 6 has killed over 120 people, with 170 still missing. People here, 1,500mi away, have been

speaking of the shock, especially commenting on the news of the 36 children and staff of Camp Mystic being swept away. It has led to compassion, empathy and memories of one's own camp days that make the ties to the flooding victims much stronger. Again, they may not be using the term, but there is no question that the people here in SLO are expressing compassion for their neighbors in Central Texas.

If we can get to that place of compassion in these circumstances, why do we have to spend time deliberating '*Who is my neighbor*'? It's a waste of time and directs us away from caring for our neighbor. And it's a theologically weak conversation.

Jesus brings scripture into His conversation with a lawyer – the scripture that the lawyer would have been spending his career defending.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus said to him, "What is written in the law?"

He answered, "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 neighbor as yourself."

Jesus said, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

- He didn't ask: *What do you mean by 'heart'?*
- He didn't ask: *What do you mean by 'soul'?*
- He didn't ask: *What do you mean by 'strength'?*
- He didn't ask: *What do you mean by 'mind'?*

Those concepts were clear to him. Yet, he asks, '*Who is my neighbor?*' Well, he's not a very good lawyer if he has to ask a homeless itinerant preacher to clarify the law for him. It says that he wanted to *justify* himself. He wanted to do what we do

when we engage with *his* question: “*And who is my neighbor?*” We want to justify *not helping* those we don’t like or don’t have time for or who are far away. Then we come to the conclusion that *all people* are our neighbors, and therefore we can justify vilifying racists, xenophobes and bigots.

German theologian and concentration camp victim Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote on the pondering of this question in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*:

[Jesus’] answer was: “*You know the commandments, do you not? Well then, put them into practice. You must not ask questions – get on with the job!*”

If we never take the time to ask “*Who is my neighbor*”, if we just get on with the job and just love them, then we stop “othering” people, we stop deciding who is and isn’t deserving. We don’t leave space for those conversations or that pattern of thinking. We just get on with the loving, like not hesitating to consider

Templeton Feed & Grain as our neighbor. [As we bring Augie into the Body of Christ today, we want him to never expend the energy considering to whom he should show mercy, and raise him to just get on with showing mercy.]

If we never take the time to ask “*Who is my neighbor*”, if we just get on with the job and just show them mercy and love them, then we increase our capacity for compassion and we build a better, stronger society that better reflects the Kingdom of God. Yet, we spend time *outside* of church asking “*Who is my neighbor*” all the time:

- *Are those living with mental health issues your neighbors?* That was the conversation at the public hearing for the Bishop Street Housing that Transitions Mental Health developed.
- *Are the unhoused persons downtown your neighbors?* That was the conversation at the public hearing for the Welcome Home Village that the County is constructing at Bishop and Johnson.

- *Are the detained migrants your neighbors?* That's the conversation that is being had in every discussion you have about Alligator Alcatraz, a concentration camp for 5k people in Florida that was built in 8 days.

"But that's different," you say. *"That's taxpayer money; that's my money. I don't want my money to go for that. They need to pull themselves up by their bootstraps!"* And I know that every one of you here has heard – or maybe even said – something similar in the not-too-distant past! Well, here's the hard truth:

- *The bootstraps of those suffering from mental illness are tangled, and they need help untangling them.*
- *The unhoused don't even have the boots with the straps of which you speak.*
- *And the undocumented migrants did pull themselves up by their bootstraps by getting themselves and their families out of dangerous and violent situations to make their way to a place they believed offered a better future: the Land of Opportunity, that claims to be a Christian country. The exact type of actions that the 'bootstraps' supporters speak of, but now question whether to love them or not.*

Yet, we are faced here with the summary of the Law – the Greatest Commandments that have stood for 2,700yrs – that are about *"love"*. The only action verb in each of the 2 sentences is *"love"*, but then we think that it's important to question which of God's people are worthy of our love.

Interestingly, the lawyer poses the question *"Who is my neighbor"*, but he didn't ask: *What do you mean by 'love'?* Was the concept of *how* to love God and neighbor obvious? Imagine if we calculated the amount of energy we have expended in trying to determine who is worthy of our love and who is not based on the commandment to love your neighbor. Imagine if that energy had been expended in just getting on with the loving. Bonhoeffer knew it:

[Jesus'] answer is: "You are the neighbor. Go along and try to be obedient by loving others." Neighborliness is not a quality in other people, it is simply their claim on ourselves.

We are the neighbor, too. There can never be just one neighbor. A neighbor is a neighbor to a neighbor. And you will notice in the story that the one who showed mercy is the neighbor ... the Samaritan ... not the one who fell to the robbers. We are the neighbor, the one who shows mercy. According to the *Oxford Bible Commentary*:

Neighborliness knows no bounds and must proceed from an attitude of spontaneity and self-forgetfulness ... The parable calls for an abandonment of all status, privilege, and exclusiveness.

That says to me that our repeated conversations about “*Who is my neighbor*” are pointless and self-centered. That includes the conversations that never mention “*neighbor*”, the conversations about who is worthy of our support as individuals, a parish, a community and a society. So, I leave the last word to the guy in the concentration camp, Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

We have literally no time to sit down and ask ourselves whether so-and-so is our neighbor or not. We must get into action and obey – we must behave like a neighbor to him.