

“The One In Need”

Luke 10:25-37

July 14, 2013

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*It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood.  
A beautiful day for a neighborhood.  
Would you be mine?  
Could you be mine?  
Won't you be my neighbor?*

Under the mentorship of Mister Rogers, many of us learned the moral of the Good Samaritan story before we even knew what a Samaritan was. Loving your neighbor is one of life's first lessons. Many of us learn it as children with our brothers and sisters. We hear: “don't hit your sister. Would you like it if he threw cheerios at you? Share your toys.” What our parents were really saying is, “We know your brother seems different than you. You need to be nice to him anyways, because you wouldn't like it if someone was mean to you for being different.”

It's amazing how differences can drive people apart from the very beginning of life. It can be something as simple as age differences between siblings that can make a brother tell his own brother to quit hanging around with him and his friends. Or a sister who tells her sister that she has no fashion sense and she'll never be cool. And it's not limited to children—even as adults we find ourselves critiquing our siblings for how they raise their kids, what town they buy their house in, and how they spend their money. If this is how we quick we are to point out differences in our family, its not too hard to imagine how quickly we separate ourselves based on our differences in the rest of the world: political differences, lifestyle differences, generational differences, and on and on. There is something almost hardwired inside of us that wants to divide ourselves into categories, so that we only have to care about the people who fit in the same boxes we do. At one point in our evolution, when we were a

part of small, separate clans, this probably served as a safety measure. But today, we are truly a global community. We realize we have more things in common with each other than we have differences, and that old survival skill of keeping ourselves separate is no longer useful.

Luckily, we spend a lot of time working against this tendency. We have amazing people, like Mister Rogers, who remind us that our neighbors are all around us, and that it is our job to care for these people, differences and all. And so we keep trying, and occasionally stumbling, to love one another, and to be good to each other.

With all that effort to be better neighbors, and all of that stumbling, it's no surprise that of all the parables, the Good Samaritan is the one we teach our kids the most. It is the one we act out in church school, (usually with a few students delighting at the idea of being the robbers) and it may be one of the only parables that most of us here feel like we have a pretty good grasp on. It is fundamental to how we try to live our lives. The Good Samaritan teaches us that not only should we take the time to help others, but we shouldn't make judgments about people based on where they are from, or what religion they are, or what they look like. In the parable, we know that the Levite and the Priest were presumed to be the good guys. We know that the Samaritan being “good” was considered an oxymoron, that Samaritans were actually considered violent people with little morals. And we know that, based on the Samaritan stopping to help the battered man, our preconceptions are worthless. It's not for us to say who is good and who is bad—because there is the potential for goodness in all of us, as the Samaritan shows us. Finally, we know that we want to try to be like the Good Samaritan—going out of our way and turning people's negative assumptions upside down by our kindness and generosity.

And that's a nice story. But it's also easy. It's one that we hear so often, in so many ways, that it stops being as effective as it might have been to early audiences. I think we have stopped listening as closely to Jesus' words as he intended us to. There is one particular turn of words that Jesus chooses to use that I would like us to pay closer attention to. At the beginning of the passage, when the lawyer is questioning Jesus, he asks, “Who is my neighbor?” After telling the story, Jesus twists that question,

and asks the lawyer, “Who do you think was the neighbor to the man who was attacked by robbers?” To put it another way, Jesus is inferring that the lawyer is the man who is attacked by the side of the road. “Who is my neighbor?” “Who is the neighbor of the broken man?” They are the same; you are the same. The surface message is that everyone is your neighbor and to show mercy is to be a good neighbor, but the deeper, harder message that Jesus is subtly saying is: You are not the Samaritan. You are the one who needs someone to stop and help you. “Who is my neighbor?” “Who do you think was the neighbor to the man in need?” “Who do you think your neighbor is?” “Who do you need to help you?”

Jesus does this very subtle, very powerful role reversal to the lawyer. The lawyer is coming to him feeling high and mighty, trying to test Jesus and get the better of him. He appears to understand Jesus and leaves understanding that it is his duty to show mercy to others, but I wonder if he caught on to the bigger point. I actually think that 2,000 years later we still struggle with it. Jesus was trying to say that it was the lawyer who needed the help. It was the lawyer who was broken and beaten on the side of the road, and it was the lawyer who was waiting for a kind soul to take mercy on him.

Jesus was not demonstrating this to shame the lawyer or to warn him to watch out for robbers. He was not going to send his friends out to beat this guy up just to prove a point. No, Jesus was simply reminding this man of one of the basic truths that we all struggle with: we are the ones in need of our neighbor's help. There are times when we might feel abandoned, when we feel powerless, when we are at our wits end and out of resources. There are times when we might feel like the man who has been taken advantage of, robbed, and beaten. And in those moments, we need to allow our neighbors to help us.

I think it is a lot easier to think about trying to be the Good Samaritan. We know that we don't always get it right, but it is a familiar lesson, and it is one we are comfortable trying to strive for. It's a lot more uncomfortable to think about the fact that we might actually be the one in need, and that there are times in our lives, probably more than we are willing to admit, when we need help from other

people. To take it step further, when was the last time you sat down and thought about how your livelihood, your very life, depends on others helping you—in indirect and direct ways—every day? It's been a while for me, and I don't think about it often because it can be overwhelming. It really pokes a hole in our spirit of independence and individualism when we start to realize how much we need other people, and how much we need other people to recognize our brokenness and our weakness so they can help us. It is humbling, and a little terrifying.

One of the most basic ways we demonstrate what it means to care for another at South Church is that when we find out someone is sick, or has had a tragedy in their family, or has something hard going on at home, we offer to cook a meal for them. We have an amazing group of people on standby, ready to make you dinner and deliver it to your house, whenever you want it. We will even call you and say, “We know this is a hard time. We'd like to help. Let us bring you dinner.” It seems simple enough right? You wouldn't believe how often we have to be talked into allowing someone to cook for us. “Oh no, that's too much! I don't need anything! We're fine!”

We walk this fine line of thinking we aren't suffering enough to deserve that kind of help or we are so concerned for other people that we don't want to burden them by admitting not having to think about preparing one more meal would be nice. If you've been on the receiving end of these phone calls, even if you finally relented, I am sure you can relate to the internal conflict that it takes to allow someone to help you, even in this quiet, basic way. And that's just a meal cooked by the church, a group that we expect to help others when they are down and out. If accepting that help becomes a struggle, I can only imagine when it the struggle that ensues when we are in need of a bigger kind of help, or when we need to accept that help from a stranger, leaving us vulnerable and feeling scared, much like the man on the side of the road must have felt.

I'm glad that just like we have models like Mister Rogers on how to be a Good Samaritan, we have role models on how to ask for and accept help. My current role model is Rev. Neichelle Guidry-Jones, who preached the first night at General Synod a few weeks ago. Rev. Jones preached about

living on the edge desperation, and the vulnerability and pain that comes with that. She is from Chicago and talked about how in 2012, more people died from violence in Chicago than they did in Afghanistan. On Father Day 2013 alone, 7 black youth were killed and 46 were injured. She talked about how young people do not feel safe playing in their yards or walking to school because kids are killed at senseless rates. She said, “In Chicago we are on a desperate edge, and on an edge where poverty and racism collide.” She said, “The poverty seems sequestered to the South Side, where seemingly helpless people of color get no covering, no assistance, and no support for their lives...” She said, “I stand before you to implore your prayers for the city of Chicago.” I don't know that I have heard someone speak with such passion, or a passion that was born out of such desperation. “I stand before you to implore your prayers for the city of Chicago.” Rev. Jones spoke her truth to a crowd and it was a humbling truth. She spoke of the very real, terrifying struggles that her community is facing. She spoke of needing our help—of needing us to care—of needing our prayers. She spoke as one on the side of the road, ready to accept the help of the Good Samaritan, ready and needed to be offered up healing.

There are three roles in the parable of the Good Samaritan: the ones who walk on by, the one who offers help, and the one who needs help. We play these roles interchangeably throughout our lives. I would argue that they are presented in order of ease: it's easy to walk on by, but we know it's not right. It's a little harder sometimes to offer help, but we know it's the right thing. And it's really hard to be the one who needs help, so hard we often convince ourselves it isn't right to need or ask for help. It's easier to be the neighbor than it is to be the one in need. As I mentioned at the beginning, we learn the lesson of how to be a good neighbor, how to be a Good Samaritan, constantly from the time we are young. The next time that lesson appears before you, or the next time you have the opportunity to be the one teaching it, think too, about what it means to be the one being helped. How can we teach each other that lesson? How can we live into it and accept it for ourselves?