

**Proper 10, Year C**

7/10/2016

[Deuteronomy 30:9-14](#)[Psalm 25:1-9](#)[Colossians 1:1-14](#)[Luke 10:25-37](#)**Who is My Neighbor?**

“Who is my neighbor?” In the basement of the District Courts Building in Weatherford, TX, as several inmates in a holding cell awaited arraignments, the lone guard keeping watch slumped over in his chair. He was having a heart attack. One of the inmates, Nick Kelton, a “self-described meth-addict,” saw this happening and did just what you might think a drug-addicted prisoner might do. He led the other inmates in a jail-break of sorts. They were able to break open the holding-cell door and rushed to the guard. They could have taken his keys and tried to make a break for it. They could have taken his gun and hurt others as they made their escape. Instead, they did the unexpected: they tried to help him. They started shouting and banging on the walls until other deputies came. The deputies were able to call paramedics in time to save the guard’s life. Kelton told reporters, it “never crossed my mind not to help, whether he’s got a gun or a badge. . . . If he falls down, I’m gonna help him.”<sup>1</sup>

Amidst all of the terrible news that hit us all so hard this week, it was refreshing to see this story. Who would imagine an addict and a prisoner like this man, not to mention his fellow inmates, might be a “good Samaritan,” a neighbor to their own jailer?

I don’t know about you, but when I used to think of the good Samaritan this is not the picture I had in my mind. When I thought of “Good Samaritans” I thought about

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Moran, “Watch Shackled Inmates Break Out Of Their Cell To Save Unconscious Jailer,” *The Huffington Post*, July 8, 2016, accessed July 9, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/inmates-break-out-save-jailer\\_us\\_577f4534e4b0c590f7e8ce64?section](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/inmates-break-out-save-jailer_us_577f4534e4b0c590f7e8ce64?section).

people who did good deeds for others when others wouldn't. I thought that when the lawyer asked, "Who is my neighbor?" that Jesus' answer—the parable—was saying that anyone who was in need was your neighbor. But that's not exactly right. It's not the man who is beaten and left for dead on the side of the road who is the neighbor any righteous person should have the good sense to reach out to help. The neighbor is the *Samaritan* who *becomes* a neighbor to the man in need, a man who would have been considered his bitterest enemy.<sup>2</sup>

Today, people generally refer to the modern-day area of Samaria as the Palestinian territories of the West Bank. A small number of Samaritans still exist in that area. The Samaritans are a conservative Jewish group who do not recognize Mount Zion (Jerusalem) and the ancient Temple as the primary holy places of Judaism. Their scriptures include only the Pentateuch, the Books of Moses, the first five books of the Bible. They're sort of like a denomination of Judaism in a way—think perhaps of the distinction in Christianity between Catholics and Protestants. There are times in Christian history when the disagreement between Catholics and Protestants has been violent. Well, likewise, the Jewish lawyer to whom Jesus was speaking, and the Jews in Jesus' parable, would have regarded the Samaritans with hostility, as enemies.<sup>3</sup> The Jewish man left beaten by the side of the road would have regarded the Samaritan man who helped him *as an enemy*. This is why the story out of Texas of the inmate and the jailer is so similar. It's about an unexpected someone feeling compassion, and reaching out in a healing way to one we would perceive to be his enemy.

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels (Kindle Edition)* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), Loc. 3536-3539.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Coggins, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 671-673.

There's also the matter of the inmate's fear. He and his fellow inmates risked having their intentions misunderstood by the guards. What if they had come in guns blazing without first determining the problem? The Samaritan in Jesus' parable was probably also afraid, for he was in a place he should not have been. The road to Jericho was hostile territory, not just because there were bandits about, but because the road is outside of Samaria. He was on the wrong side of the tracks, in enemy territory. What was he doing there? The text just says he was traveling; but regardless of what brought him there, he felt compassion, and despite the fears of how this detour might end up, he cares for his enemy.

In Clarence Jordan's "Cotton Patch" version of the Gospel of Luke, Jordan imagines the Samaritan as a black man living in 1960s Georgia, and speculates about what that man may have been thinking. He sees the stripped and beaten white man by the roadside, and in him sees something of himself. He says, "Somebody's robbed you; yeah, I know about that, I been robbed, too. And they done beat you up bad; I know, I been beat up, too. And everybody just go right on by and leave you laying here hurting. Yeah, I know. They pass me by, too."<sup>4</sup> Sometimes out of our own hurts we gain insight into the experiences of others, and perhaps find the courage to reach out as a neighbor.

"Who is my neighbor?" This week, we and people all over the country have been shocked by news out of Falcon Heights, MN, Dallas, TX, and the home of many who we consider to be our down-the-street neighbors in Baton Rouge. We saw the shocking killing of two African-American men at the hands of police officers, and the shocking

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<sup>4</sup> Clarence Jordan, *The Cotton Patch Version of Luke and Acts: Jesus' Doings and the Happenings* (Clinton, NJ: New Win Publishing, 1969), 47n.

cold-blooded murder of police officers in Dallas. As I watched all of this, maybe like you, with much distress, and as I reflected on this parable for today, I kept coming back to the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King referenced this parable in a famous sermon he preached during the Vietnam War. He said, “On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life’s roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway.”<sup>5</sup>

I was reminded of Dr. King’s words because what I keep coming back to is, “What in the world is happening on life’s highway, that proverbial Jericho road, in our country today?” Combine the stories of the last week with the stories of the last couple of months, like that of the mass shooting in Orlando; or, farther away, but no less disturbing, the terrorist attacks in Turkey, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. Lump on top of that the virulent political climate of this election season. So much violence. So much loss of precious life. So much anger. So much vitriol. And as I watch the news and I watch my social media feeds what I see is people retreating to their corners, shouting words of blame, refusing to see the possibility of anyone lying in need on the side of the road as a child of God, insisting instead only to see enemies.

Though I was disturbed this week, I was also inspired by the words of many, particularly one colleague on Facebook, who suggested we need to listen for different

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “A Time to Break Silence,” in *A Testament of Hope*, ed. Washington, James Melvin (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1986), 241.

voices. And, I'll brag on him a little because it was Bishop Gray's son, Peter. I want to read you what Peter wrote about Jesus' parable:

The story says that all the people of God are our neighbors. It says we're to surprise the world by loving when the world expects us to hate. The story says we might be surprised by whose hands reach out to us in mercy, by which people are the means of our salvation. There will be many voices to sort through in the coming days. On our TVs, in our homes, in our own conflicted hearts. Be clear: any voice that encourages hate is contrary to the gospel. Any voice that dehumanizes a child of God is contrary to the gospel. Any voice that justifies violence against a neighbor doesn't know a thing about the gospel. So don't listen to them, and be one of the voices that tells a better story.<sup>6</sup>

One voice comes to mind that is often overshadowed by the power of the parable: Jesus is himself living out the parable in the conversation he's having with the lawyer. Here's a religious lawyer, a scribe, standing up to challenge Jesus. He's trying to trap Jesus. Jesus has a dialogue with the man. A peaceful dialogue, where he no doubt speaks truth, but he himself engages lovingly with an *enemy*. He's practicing what he preaches while he preaches! In a divided culture, Jesus' voice is the one voice we need to hear.

How can we follow Jesus and the Samaritan and the inmate's examples of becoming a neighbor to others going forward? I want to challenge us with one idea based out of our own context this morning. Look around. There's no denying that, as a church, we are a mostly white, upper-middle class congregation. Many of us live in mostly white, upper-middle class neighborhoods. Most of us interact on a daily basis with mostly white, upper-middle class folks like ourselves. There's nothing wrong with that. I think that's only natural—"birds of a feather," as they say. On the Jericho road of life there is something happening that our African-American brothers and sisters are experiencing which we as white people do not experience on a daily basis. Russell Moore, the

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Gray, accessed July 9, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/revpeterwgray?fref=nf&pnref=story>.

president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, noted something in an article this week. He said, “My oldest two sons are learning to drive. I have many fears, but I’ve never worried about one of my sons being shot after being pulled over. My perspective is thus radically different than my African-American neighbor or colleague or fellow church member.”<sup>7</sup> As a father teaching my oldest daughter to drive that statement resonated with me—that’s not something I have to worry about with her. By not at least lending an ear to hear another experience, do we as largely white churches risk being like the religious elite in Jesus’ parable who pass by on the other side because it’s not our problem and we just don’t want to get involved?<sup>8</sup>

“Who is my neighbor?” I believe Jesus, by his own example of dialogue, and by sharing a story of someone unexpected who risks being a compassionate, healing presence, is asking us to become better neighbors by listening more attentively to our African-American neighbors’ stories. And, as we attempt to be a different kind of voice in the world, a gospel inspired voice, maybe we’re called to say explicitly both that black lives matter, and blue lives matter—not either/or, but both/and—just as Jesus teaches the lawyer that Samaritan lives matter and Jewish lives matter. Maybe if we did so, then in our divided culture we’d be gospel people, neighbors-in-process with a better, more compassionate, more life-giving story to tell.

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<sup>7</sup> Russell Moore, “What Shootings And Racial Justice Mean For The Body Of Christ,” *RussellMoore.com* (blog), accessed July 7, 2016, <http://www.russellmoore.com/2016/07/07/shootings-justice-body-of-christ/>.

<sup>8</sup> Nikia S. Robert, accessed July 8, 2016, <https://twitter.com/reverendaughter/status/751460971193864194>.

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