

“Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”

Luke 10:25-37 ¹

The last thing LaShanda Calloway saw before she died was people literally stepping over her to continue their shopping as though nothing had happened. LaShanda had stopped at a convenience store in Wichita, Kansas when she was stabbed in some sort of argument. As she lay dying on the floor of the store, a surveillance camera recorded five different people stepping over her to continue their shopping. One stopped for a moment, but only to take her picture with a cell phone.

“It was tragic to watch,” a police spokesman said. “The fact that people were more interested in taking a picture with a cell phone and shopping for snacks than helping this innocent young woman is, frankly, revolting.”²

Contrast that story of horror with this one of hope: Dr. Scott Kurtzman is Chief of Surgery at Waterbury Hospital, a teaching hospital associated with the medical schools at Yale and at UCONN. Five years ago, Dr. Kurtzman was on his way to deliver an 8 a.m. lecture when he witnessed one of the worst crashes in Connecticut history. The driver of a dump truck lost control of his vehicle and it flipped over and skidded into oncoming traffic. The resulting accident involved twenty vehicles, and four people were killed.

Thanks to years of emergency room experience, Doctor Kurtzman immediately shifted into trauma mode. He worked his way through the mangled mess of people and metal, pulling people from burning vehicles and treating their wounds. After about 90 minutes, when all 16 victims had been triaged and taken to area hospitals, Dr. Kurtzman got back into his car, drove to the medical school, and gave his lecture—two hours late.

This was not the first time Dr. Kurtzman has assisted those in need. Over the years, he’s stopped at a half-dozen crashes and assisted at three. “A person with my skills simply can’t drive by someone who’s injured,” says Kurtzman. “I refuse to live my life that way.”³

This morning’s text, “The Parable of the Good Samaritan,” has been the inspiration that has built many, if not most of the hospitals in the world; and because the hero of the story is a Gentile, only Luke, the Gentile physician, chose to write it down

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“What is written in the law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

He answered, “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, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live” (Luke 10:25-28).

Apparently the lawyer knew his life didn’t match his answer, because his next question was an effort to create wiggle room. “Well, so who is my neighbor?” he asked. Though his question was subtle, the lawyer was really asking Jesus, “So just how far does my responsibility extend? Surely not to rabble such as these with whom you surround yourself!”

The lawyer was a man of his time, and the boundaries of his love were tightly drawn. Strict Jews would not even help a Gentile woman in emergency childbirth, because that would only bring another Gentile into the world! And unfortunately, such religious, racial, and

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on April 10, 2011.

² Associated Press, “Police: Shoppers Stepped over Victim,” *Houston Chronicle*, July 4, 2007.

³ *Reader’s Digest*, August 2006.

economic arrogance is not just “long, long ago, and far, far away.” Such arrogance lies behind and underneath nearly all of the wrongs we humans do to each other, and this arrogance is not limited to such places as Auschwitz and Dachau. It’s within us as well.

Arrogance is the origin of the demeaning terms we sometimes use for persons right here in southwest Virginia and northeast Tennessee who seem different from us. Like the lawyer standing before Jesus, you and I frequently struggle with scorn for persons who follow particular religious beliefs, whose skin color or accent is other than that of the predominant culture, or whose income is below a certain level. I’m afraid we actually have a lot in common with this lawyer.

Jesus’ answer to the lawyer’s question about neighbors was a story set on the Jericho Road. It’s possible that Jesus was on or near that road when He told the story, because the next scene takes place in Bethany, which was on that road.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous. Jerusalem is 2,300 feet above sea level—about four hundred feet higher than Bristol—while Jericho, the lowest city in the world, is 800 feet below sea level. So the road drops 3,100 feet in about fifteen miles.

The Jericho road was dangerous, not primarily because it was steep, but because it was isolated and rocky, providing many opportunities for bandits to ambush travelers. Five centuries after Jesus, Jerome still called this road “the bloody way,” and it’s not been so very long even now since one had to pay protection money to the local sheiks in order to travel safely on it. Jesus wasn’t describing some rare event, but one with which most of His hearers were all too familiar.

“Once upon a time,” Jesus said, “a man was going from Bristol to Boone, when bandits attacked him on a very isolated stretch of highway, robbed him, and left him bloody and dying beside the road. After a while, along came one of the pastors at the First Baptist Church on his way to work. The pastor saw the man, but he pretended that he didn’t, and continued on his way to church.

“After all the man looked dead, and getting involved would greatly complicate the pastor’s schedule for the day. Besides, this guy looked Hispanic, and he might even be an illegal alien, in which case . . . well, *good riddance*.

“So the pastor moved on,” Jesus continued, “and along came a member of the church’s support staff on his way to work. Same story. Finally, along came Carlos, who actually was an illegal alien from Guatemala, and who didn’t even speak English. Carlos was driving an incredibly rusty pickup truck manufactured long before he was born. He was heading to Bristol because he’d heard that there might be migrant work there.

“Carlos saw the bloody victim and pulled over. He checked for breathing and pulse, and determined that the man was not quite dead. Somehow, Carlos managed to get the injured man into the back of his pickup and gave him a drink from his canteen. The water was hot, but at least it was water. Carlos found some Vaseline in his one battered suitcase, propped the man’s head up on the suitcase, and did his best to sooth the man’s wounds. Driving very carefully, Carlos made it to Roan Mountain, found a tiny motel with a *Se habla Español* sign, and checked the man in. Carlos paid the desk clerk for two nights’ lodging—which required everything he’d earned on his last job—and signed a contract that he would cover any additional expenses the motel incurred.

“So which one of these three,” Jesus asked the lawyer, “was a neighbor to the wounded man?” The lawyer knew he was trapped, and he answered through clenched teeth, “The one who showed him mercy.” “You got it,” Jesus said. “Now you go do the same.”

Now when you and I think of “neighbors,” our first thought may be of Mr. Rogers, or of the people who live in the houses or apartments or mobile homes or condos nearest to us. We probably even have an imaginary—perhaps an unconscious—line that delineates how far the circle of those we consider to be our neighbors extends. And in a way, such boundary marking is useful, because it helps us focus our energies and efforts and to do a better job of being “neighborly.”

I don’t think Jesus has a problem with such a use of the word “neighbor” . . . so long as it isn’t our only use of the word. The point of Jesus’ story is that those who follow Him live “in a world without borders,” as the motto of CBF Global Missions puts it. According to Jesus, everyone we encounter is our neighbor, because “neighbor” is a term of relationship, not of geography.

In July, 2008, David Neff, editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*, attended the “Loving God and Neighbor Together” dialogue between Muslims and Christians held at Yale University. During that conference, he noticed a crucial difference between the Christian and Muslim views of love, compassion, and mercy. Here’s part of what he wrote about that meeting:

“The Christian participants had been taught by Jesus that love should be indiscriminate—just as the mercy shown by the Good Samaritan was conditioned on nothing other than the wounded man’s need. That may not be the way we generally behave, but it is the . . . standard against which we measure ourselves.

“The Muslim participants startled us Christians by talking about the limits their religion brought to their compassion. Orphans, widows, and others in need through no fault of their own deserve compassion, they said. But in Islamic ethics, there is no obligation to help the person whose drunkenness or gambling or otherwise unwise behavior put them in difficulty.”⁴

With those Muslims, as with the lawyer in our story, law drew boundaries, set limits, prescribed and prohibited certain things. And law is necessary in order to contain the evil that lurks within our hearts and to impel us to those necessary goods without which we cannot live together at all. But the point of Jesus’ parable is that if we choose to follow Him, we can no longer draw such boundaries around the limits of our care.

Jesus taught that, while we cannot do less than the law, those who follow Him will live in ways that go under the law, beyond the law, and between the laws. Love surrounds the law and fills in the gaps between the laws with care and compassion.

I’ve been thinking a good bit this week about two kinds of people whom we church folk tend to put in the “Samaritan” category these days. These are groups of people we tend to treat as invisible, undesirable, and unworthy of our care—at least care in any form that might actually bring us into significant contact with them.

For example, we might give money from a distance, but we’re not really interested in any involvement that resembles Carlos’s care for the bloody man beside the road. I’m afraid that the truth is that with respect to these groups, you and I are frequently more like the people who stepped over the dying woman in the store than like the surgeon who pulled bloody people from burning cars.

The groups I’ve had in mind this week are persons who are poor and persons who are homosexual. People “like us” tend to avoid people “like them.” Let’s consider each of these briefly.

⁴ David Neff, “A Perfect Pearl,” www.ChristianityToday.com (as a part of The Christian Vision Project).

Only a week ago, I had never heard of Good Samaritan Ministries in Johnson City. Obviously named for the hero of this morning's text, Good Samaritan is a large, multi-faceted, explicitly-Christian and greatly-respected ministry that comes alongside "neighbors in need" in upper east Tennessee and helps persons and families in crisis move toward self-sufficiency and strength. Together with several other community leaders, I spent the better part of last Thursday visiting Good Sam, and I'm taking nearly two dozen more Bristoleans to see it next week. At this point, Good Samaritan Ministries looks like a very viable model from which we can learn much in our efforts to establish a Ministry Mall here in Bristol.

I look forward to seeing more clearly what God is up to with the developing vision of the Ministry Mall, and I look forward to the opportunities we'll eventually have to care for neighbors in need through the Interfaith Hospitality Network. These ministries "teach people how to fish," rather than just "giving them fish." These ministries will be "up close and personal," and we'll be blessed through our involvement with them.

I've also had occasion this week to think a good bit about the Church's relationship—or lack of it—with persons whose sexual orientation is toward persons of their same gender. For many of us in the Church, the subject of homosexuality is so emotionally charged that we work pretty hard to avoid it.

Letha Scanzoni, a theologian whose writing has had considerable influence on my understanding of the New Testament's teaching about women,⁵ also wrote a book whose title grows out of this morning's text. The title asks the question, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?*⁶ How would you answer that question if someone asked it of you? How do you think Jesus would answer it?

As I've told you before, my own understanding is that it is not sinful to be homosexual in orientation.⁷ The Bible doesn't seem to say anything about homosexual orientation, but the Bible does refer to homosexual behavior at several points.⁸

I've actually studied this matter in some detail over the years, and my own conclusion is that God's Word teaches that intimate sexual activity of any sort outside of committed heterosexual marriage is not God's purpose for us.⁹ Whether we are homosexual or heterosexual, God's rule is the same for us all.

With both poverty and homosexuality, we have only limited understanding of how persons find themselves in those situations, and we have very limited understanding about whether and how persons can move out of them. Both circumstances are extremely complex.

There is absolutely no doubt that God is almost always "on the side" of the poor. That much is clear from one end of the Bible to the other. And I am also persuaded that God loves homosexual persons just as much as God loves heterosexual persons, whatever else we make of

⁵ Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation* (Waco: Word, 1974).

⁶ Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor? A Positive Christian Response*, revised and updated (HarperOne, 1994). See also, "Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?" an address by Tony and Peggy Campolo at North Park College on February 29, 1996. www.bridges-across.org/ba/campolo.htm.

⁷ The truth is that we really don't know how persons become homosexual, and opinions differ sharply on this point. After a good bit of study on the matter, I agree with James Nelson's conclusion that "sexual orientation is relatively fixed by early childhood through processes about which the individual makes no conscious choice."

⁸ Genesis 19:3-5; Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; Judges 19:22; Romans 1:18-32; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; 1 Timothy 1:9-10.

⁹ Romans 1:24-28; 1 Corinthians 6:15-20.

their situation. I further believe that the message of this morning's text is that you and I are called to such love ourselves.

But having said that, I must be quick to point out that offering love to our neighbors—to all of our neighbors—is not a risk-free enterprise. Ministry is not risk-free. It's not supposed to be. We all spend a great deal of time and energy avoiding risk and insuring ourselves against risk, and most of that energy may be well spent . . . but risk avoidance is frequently disobedience when it comes to following Jesus.

“To this you were called,” Peter wrote, *“because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps”* (1 Peter 2:21). Jesus suffered, and we can expect that continuing His work in the world will involve suffering for us as well. We don't push back the Darkness in any significant way without suffering. God's Kingdom will not come in Bristol as it is in heaven if we who follow Jesus in Bristol work harder at avoiding risk than we do at loving our neighbors.

A man who had no interest in spiritual matters related casually to the Christian fellow who lived next door—they talked over the back fence, borrowed lawn mowers, and things like that. Then the non-Christian's wife was stricken with cancer, and she died three months later. Here's part of a letter he wrote afterward:

“I was in total despair. I went through the funeral preparations and the service like I was in a trance. After the service I went to the path along the river and walked all night. But I didn't walk alone. My neighbor—afraid for me, I guess—stayed with me all night. He didn't speak; he didn't even walk beside me. He just followed me. When the sun finally came up over the river, he came over and said, ‘Let's go get some breakfast.’

“I go to church now—my neighbor's church. A religion that can produce the kind of care and love my neighbor showed me is something I want to find out more about. I want to love and be loved like that for the rest of my life.”¹⁰ **And that's the key that unlocks the door** and lets the Light of Heaven enter the gathering Darkness of our world: to give and to receive such life-transforming love.

So it is that Jesus says to you and to me this morning, “Get out there in the rough and tumble of life and love other people the way Carlos loved the bandits' victim and the way this fellow loved his next-door neighbor. Love is something that you do. Help your neighbors even when they have brought their troubles on themselves. Get involved. Make a difference. Push back the Darkness. And as you do these things, you will feel my blessing and my power flowing through you into the world, and you will find that for which your own heart has longed since the day you were born. Go . . . and be like Carlos.”

¹⁰ Terry Muck, in the March 29 entry of *Men of Integrity* (March/April 2009).