

“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. Several 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

In that same vein, 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?”

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 12, 2015.

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

³ *Reader’s Digest*, August 2006.

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 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 central Maryland 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, 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. That’s a really steep road!

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 Columbia to Westminster, 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 local pastors 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 Baptist Deacon 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 Westminster 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 Westminster, found a 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.”

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. According to Jesus, everyone we encounter is our neighbor, because “neighbor” is a term of relationship, not of geography.

In July, 2008, then David Neff, editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*, attended a “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 how he described what he learned:

“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, religious law drew boundaries, set limits, prescribed and prohibited certain things. And law truly is necessary in order to contain the evil that lurks within our hearts and to impel us to those necessary goods without which we couldn’t 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, between the laws, and beyond the law. Law has to do with behavior; love examines the motives of the heart. Laws regulate specific behaviors; love fills in the gaps between the laws with care. Law restrains and compels; love releases and empowers.

Even so, you and I know more than one kind of love. We’re very familiar with “if” love, conditional love: “If you do this or that, then I will love you.” We’re nearly as cozy with “because” love: “Because you have done this or that, I do love you.” Like our everyday concept of neighbors, “if” love and “because” love are not wrong in themselves. They just don’t go far enough. The love to which Jesus calls us is “in spite of” love: “I choose to act in love toward you in spite of what you have done *to me* and in spite of what you have not done *for me*.”

This is, after all, the love that God has given to us, and that we’re called to share with others (Romans 5:8). To love others as Jesus loves us is to genuinely desire their well-being. It’s

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

to pray *for* them, to do good *to* them. We act in love toward our neighbors *because God loves them*, not because they rate five or better on a social scale from one to ten.

I've been thinking this week about several kinds of people whom we church folk may 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, persons who are Muslim, and persons who are homosexual. People "like us" tend to avoid people "like them."

There's been quite a furor in the news lately about various kinds of "Religious Freedom Restoration Acts" as they relate to homosexual persons in several parts of the country. Islamic extremism continues to be in the news almost every day, as it has been for years and years, and the poor are everywhere around us, if we have eyes to see.

Letha Scanzoni, a theologian whose writing has had considerable influence on my understanding of the New Testament's teaching about women,⁵ 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? Are Muslims our "neighbors"? How about the poor and the homeless here in Howard County?

I submit to you that God is nearly always "on the side" of the poor, the outcast, and the marginalized. That much seems clear from one end of the Bible to the other. I am also persuaded that God loves homosexual persons just as much as God loves heterosexual persons, and that God loves persons who are not Christians just as much as God loves those of us who are. I further believe that the message of this morning's text is that you and I are called to live out 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; and it's not supposed to be. You and I spend a great deal of time and energy avoiding risk and insuring ourselves against risk, and most of that energy is probably well spent . . . but risk avoidance is frequently disobedience when it comes to following Jesus. God's Kingdom will not come in Columbia as it is in heaven if we who follow Jesus in Columbia 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:

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.

“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.”⁷ *And that, my friends, is 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.”

⁷ Terry Muck, in the March 29 entry of *Men of Integrity* (March/April 2009).