



LEARNING AND LIVING, 21ST CENTURY STYLE

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“Learning and Living, 21st Century Style” | Luke 10:25-37 | Pastor Jess Scholten

“And who is my neighbor?” In small groups, in Bible studies, minister study groups discussing upcoming sermons, in Awaken Dane gatherings – the same question: And who is my neighbor?

For over 2000 years, we’ve been asking this question over and over and over again. No kidding – I’ve had this conversation twice in the last month. And I find myself asking it in various forms in so many areas of my life. Watching the news. Reading someone advocating for another group of people. Hearing about fundraising. Advice on how to vote. And who is my neighbor?

The question of *who are our neighbors* is a question of **where we invest**.

Let’s see in Luke 10 what Jesus has to say about being a neighbor. ([Luke 10:25-37](#))

The Good Samaritan – so familiar, it’s part of our everyday language even in the non-religious culture. But sometimes the very familiar becomes the very shallow – we know the story, so our brains just skate over the top.

There was so much animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans, there’s historical evidence that at the time of this story in the Gospel of Luke, a band of Samaritans was murdering large groups of Jews who then retaliated with similar killings. The two groups had shared history, shared the same faith, but seven centuries of geographic distance meant different traditions had been formed, and their connection to the land was widely varied. While most Jews considered Jerusalem their most sacred site, the Samaritans counted Mt. Gerizim – where Moses and the Israelites experience God – to be their most holy site.

Because of the conflict between Jews and Samaritans, no Jewish person listening to this story from Jesus could ever have identified with the Samaritan. They could not possibly walk in the shoes of a Samaritan, even in a fictitious story told by a rabbi. Not wanting to identify with the priest or Levite who walked on by, that would force them into the position of the man who has been beaten and is helpless and left for dead. That’s how extreme the story was to their ears.

The Spiritual Formation Study Bible I use reflects on how hard it would have been in the first century for a person who was Jewish to hear this story. “Imagine their mixture of horror and relief when the one who saves them is the one they hate. This story is not only about stopping to help those whom we have been taught to mistrust or have had bitter conflict with. It is also about putting ourselves in the skin of the half-dead, the destitute, the despairing – sometimes a place

where we can indeed find ourselves at one or more points on our own journey.... It is about realizing *our neighbor* is the one who is kind to us, regardless of skin color, religion, politics, or personal past history.”

That’s a twist on who is my neighbor!

My neighbor is the person I am connected to – not necessarily because they live nearby – but because I am willing to live near them in my heart. My neighbor is the one on whom I have compassion, in whom I invest, for whom I am willing to change my plans. (Neighbor Slide)

“And who is my neighbor?”

Our presbyterian expert on neighbors, the Rev. Fred Rogers, puts it most pointedly: I wonder if God and neighbor are somehow one?

When we ask, like the lawyer, coming all technical at Jesus: And who is my neighbor?, Jesus doesn’t come back at us all technical – “it’s the two houses on either side of you – it’s the people with whom you worship – it’s the ones who live in your subdivision.”

Jesus isn’t saying, go and do good for the people who live around you – he saying go and become a neighbor to those in need. Yes, we want to be good neighbors to the people who live around us, but as Justo Gonzalez reflects in his commentary on Luke, “‘Go and do likewise,’ does not simply mean go and act in love to your neighbor, but rather, go and become a neighbor to those in need, no matter how alien they may be.” (Justo Gonzalez, Luke, WJK, p. 139-40)

When the expert in the law wants to vindicate himself, he asks Jesus the question: “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus responds with this story of this man beaten and left on the roadside. Two people who might do well to be known for helping others – a religious professional, the priest, and someone else who was a leader in a faith community, the Levite – instead walk to the other side.

But the sworn enemy of the listener – the one who makes your skin crawl or turns your heart to stone – that guy stops. That guy is the one who takes the time. That guy generously provides healing, care, compassion and generosity for the one robbed and beaten. And then Jesus looks back to the lawyer and turns his question upside down: “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

“He said, ‘the one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’”

I would like it noted for the record that this passage was chosen for this week when we put the devotional schedule together over three months ago.

“He said, ‘the one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’”

So where are you being called to be a neighbor to someone in need?

I think the Spirit will tell you if you ask... and keep your eyes open. But if you need a few suggestions, we're flush with opportunities to be a good neighbor here at Covenant Presbyterian. About a year ago – yeah, we're coming up on a year of my being a pastor here – I signed up for the Black History for a New Day course – an invitation to humbly explore the connection between the current racial tension in the United States and its 400-year history of slavery and injustice. We partner with Justified Anger, so that we can have our own breakout group, and GMB offers cost-offset and scholarships, so we can easily participate. And there's no homework – it's simply listening to a lecture on zoom at 7 pm on Monday nights and then processing it with other congregation members and friends afterwards.

I say we make it easy, but it is not an easy course to take, because it's overwhelming. It will bring up sadness and remorse and so much justified anger. And it will make you want to do more to dismantle racism. When you ask the leaders and teachers of the course what the next steps are, they will tell you no uncertainty two things: one, have more people take the course so you can be informed; and two, do all that you can to raise a non-racist next generation. There's a Black History for a New Day course starting soon – talk to me, Pastor Charlie, Jenny von Bergen, or just email or call the church office to get signed up.

If you're looking for other ideas, I plead that you actually read the bulletin and the newsletter – we've got our monthly newsletter, the Caravan, coming out this week. Don't just glance through but set aside some time to prayerfully read and digest what's in it. The 24th there's a great opportunity to serve a meal at Triangle Ministries. There are fellowship opportunities to make new friends and support one another, so we have a foundation of friendship through which we can then share grace and mercy with others – being Good Samaritans wherever we go.

We've heard about mercy this week – a plea for it from the Right Reverend Marian Edgar Budde – the Bishop of Washington. (full sermon: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jan/24/bishop-mariann-edgar-budde-sermon-that-enraged-donald-trump>)

I'm kind of a nerd about church architecture, and the National Cathedral is a chef's kiss of beauty and wisdom. The Cathedral is probably most well-known in the news for the Space Window specifically, the Scientists and Technicians Window, dedicated in 1974 in the presence of the Apollo 11 astronauts.

Behind the Bishop on the chancel – the stage area in the front of a church – is a reredos, the carving backdrop that includes over 110 statues of saints, angels, and mighty leaders in the church. In the center is Christ surrounded by the four gospels writers. Two layers out from Christ are six unnamed figures – one holds bread, another a vessel for water, another a garment. These six figures “recall the Works of Mercy from the Gospel of Matthew [chapter 25]: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of

me, I was in prison and you visited me.” (<https://cathedral.org/visit-tour/points-of-interest/?id=14>)

Like the Bishop’s plea, we will continue to care for those who are in need of compassion, for those living in fear. We will continue to stand behind our – and Jesus’ – values of welcoming and affirming a gender-spectrum and members of the LGBTQ+ family. We will continue to care for the outcast and those on the margins. We will continue to dismantle structural racism, seek just laws for the poor, those behind bars, and people with varying abilities.

Jesus knew about the ways we would need to learn and grow and better understand compassion and care – like the parable of the Good Samaritan and the mercy he shared, like the call to serve the least and lost. That call is for us. Now.

Lutheran lay minister Venice Williams, a healer, community advocate, and the executive director of a food non-profit in Milwaukee Fondy Market, offered the following reflection the day after the election last November:

You are awakening to the/ same country you fell asleep to.
The very same country.

Pull yourself together.

And,/ when you see me,/ do not ask me/ "What do we do now?
How do we get through the next four years?"
Some of my Ancestors dealt with/ at least 400 years of this
under worse conditions.

Continue to do the good work.
Continue to build bridges not walls.
Continue to lead with compassion.
Continue the demanding work/ of liberation for all.
Continue to dismantle broken systems,/ large and small.
Continue to set the best example/ for the children.
Continue to be a vessel of nourishing joy.
Continue right where you are.
Right where you live into your days.

Do so in the name of/ The Creator who expects
nothing less from each of us.

And if you are not "continuing"/ ALL of the above,
in community, partnership, collaboration?
What is it you have been doing?
What is it you are waiting for?

Venice Williams' plea is pointed. It's been an overwhelming week. There's a lot of confusion, fear mongering, and frankly crazy talk. So steady yourselves. Or as Venice Williams writes: Pull yourself together. Our mandate is to love ourselves and love our neighbor, and we can love our neighbor best when we are firmly planted on the foundations of our faith – hope, peace, love – the goodness to which we are called.

There are people lying on the side of the road, wounded, robbed, left for dead. Rarely is it so obvious as walking by them and seeing them on the ground. Rather, they are sitting next to us in the classroom, waiting in line with us at the grocery store, walking by us in the hallway at work. So pull yourselves together. Pray in earnest for the fruits of the Spirit to continue to be grown in you, through Covenant, and in Christ's Church.

Keep your eyes peeled for neighbor and God, and keep your hearts bent toward mercy.