



## Broken Reflections: Broken Neighborhoods

Luke 10:25-37

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In this season of Lent, we are considering the brokenness that exists in the world. From the fractured unity of national governments, to the divisive clans that seek supremacy over one another here in the States, to the deep pain we hold in our own hearts, we are a broken people in need of healing. In the midst of our broken reflections, God seeks to offer reconciliation and healing – reconnecting us to the love of the Lord, and into a more faithful community with one another. Today, our focus is on the brokenness present in our local community – in our own neighborhoods.

As the scripture was read, many of you, who were either present last week or who heard the sermon online, will question whether or not the doctors fixed my head or not. Pastor Thomas, you may ask, didn't we just read this scripture last week? I'm glad you asked. Yes, we did – kind of.

Last week, we read Luke 10:30-37, and we identified how the parable of the so-titled *Good Samaritan* calls us to work toward healing in our fractured nation by refusing to demonize others because of their differences. We considered how upsetting it would have been for the Jewish hearers of Jesus' parable that a Samaritan was identified as the faithful one – how this man considered an outcast and rebellious heathen of the faith was the one who broke religious and cultural customs, and who pushed through any personal fears to offer mercy to the broken, bruised, and beaten man on the side of the road.

The parable in and of itself offers a valuable lesson regarding God's healing work, and it speaks of Christ's invitation to us to join in the work of reconciliation by rejecting the demonizing of others for their differences. It speaks of the need to be people of mercy, who put our own resources – our time, our money, and our personal safety – on the line to share God's love with others.

As good and powerful as the parable is, to understand the parable in its fullness is to understand the context in which the parable is offered. So today, we not only hear again the parable, but we hear the verses leading into it, which offer the foundation for Jesus' teaching.

Prior to verse 25, Jesus has been travelling in his ministry. He comes down from the Mount of Transfiguration with his face set toward Jerusalem. In Luke 9 and 10, the stories tend to flow one in to the other without a great deal of narrative description. We don't really know where Jesus is or who all is with him. He has just finished speaking privately with the disciples, and out of nowhere, a lawyer stands up to test Jesus. The transition in narrative is disjointed enough to lead one to believe Jesus is in a different place and has a gathered crowd around him, which would not be out of the ordinary for this wandering rabbi who performed miracles.

The lawyer stands up – drawing attention to himself – and speaks to Jesus in order to test him, "Jesus, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The translation here, *to test him*, makes it seem as if the lawyer is being a bit irritable with Jesus. The question comes out with an air of arrogance and hostility. Jesus

tries to deescalate the situation by responding to the question with a question, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

Can I just say, this kind of response is hardly ever what we want when asking questions of another? When I was serving at Centreville Methodist, my senior pastor used to do this all the time. I’ve come in to his office with some complicated situation, hoping he would tell me how to navigate or respond. More times than not, his response was, “What do you think you should do?” ... Ugh, really? If I thought I knew what I should do, I wouldn’t be coming to ask you!

Yet, this method of response is fairly effective. Again, more times than not, when my senior would ask me what I thought I should do, I had an opinion and a response. (I mean, honestly, when do I not have an opinion?) There were times when he didn’t love my response, and in those times, he would let us sit in this awkward silence to make me think about what I had just said. Yet, if he thought my response was appropriate, he’d simply say, “It seems like you know what you need to do.” So frustrating ... But educational. More times than not, we know the answer, we just haven’t convinced ourselves to act upon it. This question for question teaching method is effective, albeit frustrating.

Jesus asks, “What do you think?” And of course, the lawyer has an answer. The lawyer responds as any good lawyer will do, pulling from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, he is literally quoting the law, “You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.”

In his testing of Jesus, it seems the test has been turned around on him. He says, “Jesus, can *you* tell me what the Bible says?” ... Jesus says back, “Can you tell *me* what the Bible says?”

The man’s response is like that of any good person of faith – he knows the black and white text of what the good book says. Like when you ask a Sunday School class a question, you can always count on someone to offer those stock answers, “God,” “Jesus,” or “The Bible.” The man’s answer is nothing special – he’s literally just quoting the Bible.

Jesus affirms his response, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But misery loves company, so the man isn’t satisfied that Jesus has just flipped the script on him. This was to be his moment of testing the rabbi, and the teacher turned the task around on him. So, seeking to justify himself, he poses another question.

We should wonder, what’s he trying to justify? Does he think his answer to Jesus somehow implicates himself? Is he trying to prove how obedient to the law he has been? Or perhaps, has he done something that might have been seen as unloving to another person, and he wants to prove he is still deserving of ‘life?’

The lawyer correctly identified the black and white of the law, but his next question pushes the issue. He knows what the law says, but instead of simply obeying, he has more questions to ask. It seems the lawyer is more interested in engaging in theological debate as a means to avoid obedience, instead of just being obedient to the law.<sup>1</sup> I like to call this kind of postponement, “prayerful deferment” (instead

of prayerful discernment). You know what I mean? When you know clear and well what God wants, but you aren't ready to commit, so you say, "I'm going to pray some more about this." Like when the trustees of the church are ready to change the carpet from red to blue, but there's one or two on the committee who don't like the change, so they speak up and say, "Let's pray some more about this – I'm not sure that's the most faithful change." We prayerfully defer being faithful because deep within, we don't like what it looks like to be faithful.

So, the lawyer seeks to justify himself, wanting to debate his faithfulness, asking, "Who is my neighbor?" As in, I know the law says I must love my neighbor as myself, but honestly, Jesus, there's some people I don't want to love. I know it says to love my neighbor, but I haven't exactly loved everyone up to now, so I want to just check in and see how I'm doing. We ask this question, "Who is my neighbor" to try and justify our animosity to some, wondering, and perhaps hoping, that person isn't really my neighbor.

Asking the question, "who is *my* neighbor" implies selectivity, claiming that some are neighbors and some are not, and therefore I need to know, who are the ones I should love?

Jesus then tells the parable of the neighborly Samaritan. The priest and Levite, seeing the wounded man beaten and left for dead on the side of the road, move to the other side of the road and pass him by. But the Samaritan, seeing the same man, comes near him and moves toward him – he went to the man to care for his wounds. He sees the same man, in the same condition as the other two, but he has compassion, and he draws near him.

As he concludes the story, Jesus flips the script. See, the lawyer, in seeking to justify himself, had asked the question, "Who is *my* neighbor?" He wants to know: *how do I know who it is I am to love?* Jesus rejects the lawyer's question with another question of his own, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" Jesus changes the question from, "Who is my neighbor?" to the question, "Which of these men proved to be a neighbor?"

The healing for the brokenness of our world and of our nation, it starts in our local community. It starts in our local neighborhoods. It starts in our personal relationships. We are often so focused on our expectations for other people, that when we are questioning Jesus on who to love, we're looking at the other to see if *they* are worthy of being *our* neighbor.

This mentality pervades our lives and it's toxic within our local communities. When we are looking for a new place to live, a new gym in which to work out, a new restaurant in which to dine, or a new office environment, what are the first things we look at? Who lives here; who works here; who dines here; who socializes here? We are selective in each of these ways, asking the question, who will be *our* neighbor in this new place?

When we move to a new community, we ask the question, where will my child go to school? I've done this myself – I'm confessing to you now, church – I have asked the question: with whom will my child go to school? As if, by knowing the demographic makeup of the school, I can decide whether or not my child can get a good education in this district.

We ask this question, who should I see as *my* neighbor, consciously or unconsciously, every time we choose seats on a plane. Have you seen this practice? Even on Southwest, where you don't get to pre-select your seats, you walk on the plane and people are sitting two people per row, one in the aisle, one against the window, with an open seat in the middle. We want to pick the seat where we are least likely to have to sit by someone else, because we're unsure of who that person might be. It's easier to not sit next to *anyone* than to sit next to someone we have judged unworthy of being our neighbor.

The Mayor of Alexandria likes to talk about our city by saying we are a city of neighborhoods. From Rosemont, to the Berg, to Carlyle, to Del Ray, to Parker-Gray, to Beverly Hills, to Potomac Yards, to Arlandria, to Franconia, to Cameron Station, to Landmark, to North Ridge, to Old Town ... and then, of course, there's South Alexandria, or as some call it, "Lower Alexandria," which refers to all of us who live outside the Beltway in Fairfax County. Each neighborhood carries with it some mental vision of who lives in the neighborhood, and brings with it an ethos of being. Don't you dare tell someone from Rosemont they live in Del Ray – that's a totally different neighborhood. Don't tell someone from Cameron Station they live in the West End, because that carries a very different visual image of community.

We reject and choose certain neighborhoods as if we are defined by those who are our neighbor, by those who physically reside in the homes, apartments, streets, and condos adjacent to our own.

Yet, Jesus insists in response to the lawyer, "Who is my neighbor?" is the wrong question. If that is your question, Jesus contends, *you're doing it wrong*. The question you should be asking is, how can I be a neighbor to others? No who is *my neighbor*, but to whom am I being called to *be* a neighbor?

Jesus asks the question, "Which of these was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The lawyer responds, "The one who showed him mercy." The one who exemplified what it means to be the neighbor was the one who drew close to the other; it was the one who showed compassion to the other; it was the one who cared for the other; it was the one who put the needs of the other above his own needs; it was the one who risked his own well-being for the well-being of the other; it was the one who broke through cultural and religious expectations to get close to the other; it was the one who loved the other as God loves us, sacrificially and unrelentingly, to ensure our brokenness is healed.

This is the love of God, and this is how we heal our broken communities – our broken neighborhoods – not by wondering, *who* must we love, but by asking, *how can* we love on another?

Jesus ends with this final sending statement of affirmation, "Go and do likewise." Go, he says, and show mercy on the other. That is the answer to your inquiry of justification. You want to be justified? Then go and be merciful; go and be a good neighbor. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible: Luke*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2010.