

“What Is Love of Neighbor?”

In our gospel lesson today from Luke 10: 25-37, Luke gives us one of the stories that even non-Christians are likely to have heard before: the parable of the Good Samaritan. Those of us who go to church have likely heard it before; I have preached on it before; this repetition should tell us how important it is to love our neighbor. But hearing it regularly can also make it easy to lose sight of this message.

There are various ways to interpret this story. Many readers focus on the first two who pass by, avoiding the bleeding stranger in the road. The priest and the Levite have high status in their culture, and we might expect better behavior from them. Their religious vocations might lead some people to outrage over their hypocrisy. But this is not Jesus' focus in the parable.

We could focus on the victim, traveling alone on the road to Jericho. But this is not a cautionary tale of how to avoid trouble. We might need a description of what happened to the victim so we understand what needs be done. In the details of how the Samaritan cares for the victim, binding his wounds with oil and wine, we might see a foreshadowing of the crucifixion of Jesus. But although Jesus might be telling us something about his death, he also has a broader lesson about life.

The lesson is about the Samaritan and what he does. Those who heard Jesus tell this story would have been expecting bad behavior from this character, because Samaritans were seen as enemies. Samaritans were portrayed in Jewish culture as less than appealing, less than human. They were seen as trying to gain advantages they did not deserve. Surely they would not help out just anyone hurt on the road. Yet, the Samaritan turns out to be the hero of the story---the one who provides an example of how to live our lives.

In this surprise twist, with this unusual hero, Jesus tries to stop the standard responses of listeners and to shock them into a new realization. He could have just said “the greatest commandments are these: love God, and love your neighbor as yourself.” But he uses as great practical story. With its surprise twist of exemplary behavior from the least likely place, the story of the Good Samaritan shows what the Great Commandments mean. And here we see the size of the task that God gives us.

He arrived at Ellisa’s parents’ house in the spring of 2015. He rode up in his 20 year old tattered Ford Bronco. Half the paint was chipped off. All his worldly belongings were in the Bronco. He had no job and little money to his name. At age 56 his world seemed at an end.

His name was Mike. He had attended Christ Church Episcopal School in Greenville with Ellisa and about 50 other students. They spent some thirteen years together in what is considered one of the best academic schools in the state. Mike was not disliked or hated. But as the Samaritan who helped the beaten man, Mike was different from those in his class at Christ Church. He lacked social skills and was, at times, laughed at behind his back. He was not as gifted intellectually as the others. He was able to attend because his mother taught at Christ Church.

After graduation, he went to college but was never able to get a job as a lawyer, doctor, stock broker or accountant. These jobs went to others in his class. He struggled with even the most basic jobs.

His mother helped him through his early struggles. At one point she even paid for him to go to school to be a funeral home director. But that didn't work out either. Eventually a relative helped him get a job with the national office of Budget Rent-A-Car in Dallas. He moved out to Dallas and worked there for a number of years.

But life finally went bad for Mike. His mother left him some money when she died. But Mike was not able to keep his job forever, and the money from his mother ran out, mainly due to uninsured medical bills of over \$100,000. He had kidney problems which eventually caused heart problems. When he arrived in

Greenville in 2015, he was broke, without a job, and had health problems. At 56, his future was bleak.

Mike was liked by his classmates from high school, but they had no obligation to do anything for him. He was not from their social class; he didn't hang out with them. They could have said nothing, or maybe some of them could have said they loved him and were praying for him.

But they did so much more. When his closest friends from high school found about his situation, they stepped into action. They found a place where he could rent a room from an elderly retired professor. They started a Go Fund Me campaign to raise money for him. They were able to get a job for him at Goodwill. Those who led the charge were now living all over the country.

Mike was able to live a meaningful life for the next two years. Sadly, his heart condition was beyond repair. He died quietly while eating one afternoon at his favorite place, the Olive Garden near Cherrydale in Greenville. The generosity and love shown by his classmates had allowed the last two years of his life to be productive and happy.

What happened with Mike shows that love is action, not emotion. We show our love by what we do for those who need us. It's not enough to see our fellow human beings and think about how much we love them. We have to do something.

As Mike's situation shows, many people are in need and it is through no fault of their own. Even if they have caused their own problems, we still need to love them. We have to go through this life behaving as if we love each other. We can behave ourselves into love.

This training of love for the world can start small. We might not start out by giving away all our possessions. I don't think that's really commanded of us. But we can start where we are. You already do much for your community. Latimer is involved with helping with BIMA and Meals on Wheels for those who need food. You are also involved with providing school supplies to students in the Belton school system.

There is always more we can do. We can help out even when we don't have to. We can stop keeping track of who has done what to wrong us or who is taking advantage of the system. Instead of keeping track of our losses, we can keep track of gratitude. We can share with people who haven't had the lucky breaks that we have had. Recently a church in Michigan paid nearly \$2 million dollars in medical bills for 1,899 families suffering in poverty. The church did this by buying the debt from a nonprofit debt purchasing organization for \$15,000. This money came out of the church's mission budget. The beauty of this whole transaction was the fortunate families were notified that the church helped them but the church,

because of medical privacy laws, never knew the identities of those whom they blessed with this offering. Of course, with a gift like this, it was not necessary to know who they helped, just that they needed help.

It's not enough, however, to love the people who are easy to love. It's much harder to love those who have behaved in horrible ways. But we must love them too. In fact, it might be the most important task. To truly love they neighbor as thyself one must be able to love those whom one perceives as having wronged them, their family, or their country. And our love to them is shown by helping them out.

It's easy to see the Samaritan as a Christ figure: the outsider who stops to help, who takes charge of the victimized whom has been left to bleed to death by the side of the road, who finds care for the victim and pays for it. But we are also called to be good Samaritans to the world. If we start looking for opportunities to bind the world's wounds, we'll find that the world has no shortage. We show our love for God by loving each other, and the ways we show love for each other are as varied as humanity itself. There is no limit to the opportunities we have to fulfill this commandment to love they neighbor as thyself.