

A Different Kind of World

Luke 10: 25-37

Luke 11: 1-13

Rev. Kathryn Escandell, First Presbyterian Church, McAllen, Texas

July 28, 2019

In 1569 in Holland, a Mennonite named Kirk Willems, under capital sentence as a heretic, was fleeing from arrest, pursued by a “thief-catcher”. As they ran across a frozen body of water, the thief-catcher broke through the ice. Without help, he would have drowned. What did Dirk Willems do then?

Was the thief-catcher an enemy merely to be hated, or was he a neighbor to be loved as one loves oneself? Was he an enemy whom one must love in order to be a child of God? Was he “one of the least of these my brethren”?

What Dirk Willems did was turn back, put out his hands to his pursuer and save his life. The thief-catcher, who then of course wanted to let his rescuer go, was forced to arrest him. Dirk Willems was brought to trial, sentenced, and burned to death.

Wendell Berry tells this story in an essay entitled, “The Burden of the Gospels” and it offers us a stark illustration of what it can cost to take to heart Jesus’ instruction that we are to be loving neighbors to everyone.

We have read two passages from Luke this morning – both of them familiar, both of them challenging in their message and their meaning. I am taking advantage of the fact that when Ed Sackett preached here two weeks ago, he did not use the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which was the passage designated by the lectionary for that morning. Today’s assigned verses are the ones from chapter 11 where the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, and he responds with a form for their prayers and an assurance that God is both able and willing to hear and answer when we pray.

One of the most helpful habits of our Presbyterian theology is to read Scripture in conversation with itself – to see how verses or passages comment on or critique or illuminate one another.

That’s what we going to do this morning with our two passages from Luke’s Gospel.

When the disciples come to Jesus and ask him to teach them to pray, he responds with what we have come to call The Lord’s Prayer. The version which Luke includes in his Gospel is a bit shorter than the more familiar form which we find in Matthew’s Gospel, but this is still a profound and powerful prayer. Each of its statements and petitions are worth careful consideration and appreciation. Today we are going to lift out the first petition: *Your Kingdom come* and put it in conversation with the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which opens a window into that kingdom for which Jesus instructs his disciples to pray.

First, a quick word about the Parable. We often make this story about judging the priest and the Levite who don't stop to help the injured man. Perhaps we point out that the road between Jerusalem and Jericho was notoriously dangerous; that robbers along that road often pretended to be injured or dead to trick travelers into stopping to help. Perhaps we point out that when the priest and Levite saw this victim beside the road, they were put in the difficult position of having to, as Fred Craddock puts it, make a "choice between duty and duty"; should their priority be to provide help to this man or should it be to remain on schedule and ritually undefiled so they could fulfill their religious responsibilities to their communities.

But this parable isn't about placing blame or finding fault with Judaism or Jewish officials. We all already know how it feels to be unwilling or unable to step into a situation of need. Every day we pass by – whether physically or mentally or emotionally – any number of situations that need attention. Whatever our reasons for each of those passings-by, we leave those situations for others to address, as the priest and Levite did in the parable.

This parable isn't about making us feel guilty for times we cannot help. It is about inviting us to see how God's kingdom comes through acts of loving service. It is about inviting us to understand that, in the words of Andrew Prior, "we don't *have* neighbors. We *are* neighbors. Or not."

I have lately found myself – and I know many of you are experiencing this too – listening to the news and thinking how overwhelmed I feel by the news. Thinking how thoroughly I lack the attention span and the stamina to consistently love my neighbor – all my neighbors or even a significant percentage of them – in any meaningful way.

That has led me to thinking about the various categories of neighbors that we have, and the various ways we act as neighbor to those different categories of people.

There are neighbors we know well, who are part of our lives on a regular basis. For instance, the community of neighbors within this congregation. These are the neighbors it is easiest to love. We know one another, and so our words and acts of love arise out of a personal relationship. Even if there are topics on which we disagree, those disagreements do not overcome the ties between us. If Jesus had instructed us to love the neighbors we already like and to pray that God's kingdom will come among the community in which we feel most comfortable and secure, we would have no trouble complying.

There are neighbors we know more distantly or indirectly, but with whom we still feel a personal connection. For many years, University Presbyterian in Austin has had a sister congregation in Democratic Republic of Congo. Even though trips by one congregation to visit the other are no longer a regular occurrence, these two communities stay in touch; they continue to hold one another in prayer; gifts they have exchanged in the past remain on display

in each church's spaces. This type of neighbor is also pretty easy to love and to pray for; especially in those instances where an ocean is between us to wash away the sorts of challenges or disputes that might arise from closer proximity.

There are neighbors we do not know personally at all, but for whom we are instructed to pray, about whom we are called to care. We learn of their circumstances and needs through news reports. The people of Syria and Yemen who are caught up in devastating civil wars. The Muslim Rohingya people of Myanmar and the Christian Uighurs of China who are targets of religious and ethnic discrimination. There are people in need of loving neighbors in every part of the globe.

And, of course, right in our midst are so very many Central American neighbors who have traveled here seeking safety from the dangers of their home countries. We see images and hear stories that make it clear they need prayer and care. I think many of us find these neighbors harder to love. For some of us, the difficulty comes from our conviction that these people pose a threat to our nation. Others of us find it challenging to truly love the migrants and asylum seekers because we feel so overwhelmed by their need and so inadequate to help them, particularly in the face of official immigration policies.

Beyond the individuals and groups who come to our attention for one reason or another, there are in the world *billions* of people we will never know and never know much about. People with whom we will never have more of a connection than our shared humanity. And some of those people look like us, and some of them don't. And some of those people think like us, and some of them don't. Some of them fit within our self-set parameters of what an ethical, successful human life looks like, and the little that we do know about them causes many of them to scare, or annoy, or disturb us in any one of thousands of different ways. And how – dear God – are we to act as neighbor to them?

While contemplating the vast and varied needs of people around the world can seem overwhelming, I expect for many of us, the hardest neighbors to love, the hardest people to act as neighbor to, are the ones with whom we disagree. The ones we think are wrong about everything that matters. In these days of bitter division and growing suspicion in our nation, we all have too many people we hesitate to call neighbor.

So, I am going to be political and specific here for a moment. And no doubt I will manage to annoy all of you. But here is the contemporary meaning of the parable of the Good Samaritan; here is what Jesus expects of us today as we hear his teaching about being loving neighbors to even those we have been encouraged to despise. Here is what it means to pray as Jesus taught.

Republicans – we are to genuinely love and authentically pray for Nancy Pelosi, Chuck Schumer, and all the other public figures and family members and friends and former friends whose political convictions seem so very wrong.

Democrats – we are to genuinely love and authentically pray for Donald Trump and Mitch McConnell, and all the other public figures and family members and friends and former friends whose political convictions seem so very wrong.

The very people we most don't want to pray for or care about are the ones we most need to pray for if we truly want to follow Jesus' teachings; if we truly want to participate in the work of the coming of God's kingdom.

Jesus calls us to be a neighbor in this world. He teaches us to pray that God's kingdom will come. We do not act as neighbor and the kingdom cannot come if we focus on preserving boundaries that distinguish between those we are willing to care for and about, and those we would exclude.

Wendell Berry writes:

The Samaritan reaches out in love to help his enemy, breaking all the customary boundaries, because he has clearly seen in his enemy not only a neighbor, not only a fellow human or a fellow creature, but a fellow sharer in the life of God.

Berry goes on: When Jesus speaks of having life more abundantly, this, I think, is the life he means: a life that is not reducible by division, category, or degree, but is one thing, heavenly and earthly, spiritual and material, divided only insofar as it is embodied in distinct creatures. He is talking about a finite world that is infinitely holy, a world of time that is filled with life that is eternal.

Jesus calls each of us to be a neighbor in this world. He teaches us to pray that God's kingdom might come.

May we, individually and communally, bring that prayer to life this day and every day through loving acts of service to neighbors near and far, familiar and unknown, for with such acts is the kingdom made.

Amen.