"Who Is My Neighbor?"

A sermon delivered by Rev. W. Benjamin Boswell
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Season after Pentecost/Proper 10 from Luke 10:25-37

Love. Love on the lips of a lawyer trying to test Jesus and love on the lips of people singing, praying, and worshiping together in churches all around the country today. How can we even talk about love today after a week that was filled with so much violence and hate? What does love even look like in our broken world? Must we talk of love? Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. They are the two greatest commandments. They sum up entire law. All of scripture, and faith, and the Church, hang on these words. It’s impossible to overstate how important these two commandments are, yet after thousands of years, we are still asking, “What does it mean to love my neighbor?” and, “Who is my neighbor?” Was Alton Sterling or Philando Castile our neighbor? What about the police who killed them—are they our neighbors? Were the officers who were killed in Dallas our neighbors? What about the shooter who killed them—was he our neighbor? Who is our neighbor?

It may seem like a simple question, but it is most definitely not today and it never has been. In fact, it is a question that has been debated since the time of Jesus when a lawyer who was trying to test him asked this very same question “Who is my neighbor?” The question itself revealed the lawyer’s deceptive intentions. As an expert in the law, he was trying to justify himself by asking Jesus this loaded question. He was hoping Jesus would fall into the trap of defining the term neighbor the way it was defined in Lev. 19. In the law, the term, “neighbor,” was a term that was restricted to fellow Israelites who shared a similar identity and a common border. “Neighbor” was distinguished from other terms like “foreigner, stranger, and alien.” Israel had obligations to care for these groups, too, but not like neighbors. Neighbor was a racially, ethnically, nationally, geographically, and religiously determined category. The lawyer was challenging Jesus to define the term neighbor in the traditional way—in an exclusive way that set limits on his legal responsibility and obligation to other people.

By asking Jesus “and who is my neighbor?” what the lawyer was really asking Jesus was, “Who is not my neighbor? Who can I exclude from the category of neighbor? Who falls outside that designation? Where do we draw the line? Who do I not have to love? Who can I ignore?” Few religious people have ever been as honest and forthcoming as the lawyer was about his desire to define the word “neighbor” in a way that limited who he was required to love—yet we all have our limits, don’t we? We like to say trite things like “I love everybody” or “Everyone is my neighbor,” or “All lives matter,” but internally, we all know there are people we’d like to exclude from these categories, who we don’t want to love—people we don’t know how to love. Both Luther and Calvin claimed “we are all neighbors,” that is unless you are a Jew, a Catholic, a Muslim, a sectarian, or a believer in the heretical doctrine of free will!

Throughout history, Christians have been notorious for putting limits on the word “neighbor.” First it was, “all are neighbors, except the Jews.” Then it was “all are neighbors except the heretics”—then it was pagans, then savages, foreigners, slaves, women, Communists, and on and on. Today many say, “all are neighbors,” but what they really mean is “all are neighbors except the poor, the queer, the black, brown, immigrant, or Muslim.” There has never been a time in history when Christians did not put restrictions on the term neighbor in order to limit who they were called to love. Jesus knew exactly what the lawyer was trying to do. He knew the lawyer was asking for a definition of “neighbor” that excluded a segment of the population. But instead of getting into a theological argument with him,
Jesus did what Jesus loved to do—he told a story. As Dr. King once put it, “Jesus pulled the lawyer’s question out of thin air and placed it on the dangerous curve between Jerusalem and Jericho.”

The road to Jericho was an extremely rough stretch of treacherous terrain that dropped over 3,000 feet in 17 miles. The bends and curves in the road made it the perfect road for bandits to ambush travelers. In fact, there were so many robberies on that particular road that it was called, “The Bloody Pass.” Jesus said, “A man was going down that dangerous road when he fell among robbers who stripped him, beat him, and went away leaving him half dead.” We all know the rest of the story—a priest and a Levite walk by in succession and see the man lying there half dead and passed by on the other side of the road. Most Jewish readers listening to this story would have recognized the familiar trope of three and expected another traveler to come down the road, but they would have thought that final traveler would be an Israelite lay person—“a priest, a Levite, and an Israelite” was the common story-telling technique. But then suddenly, and seemingly out of nowhere, Jesus overturned everyone’s expectations and put a Samaritan on that road.

Jews hated Samaritans. Think of the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman—they weren’t supposed to talk to each other, let alone drink the same water! Samaritans were unclean, pagan, foreigners—a mixed race of half-breed, religious heretics. They were the epitome of “bad neighbors” who had oppressed the Jewish people. In fact, most Jews would describe the Samaritans as their “enemies,” and yet that is whom Jesus made the hero of his story. When Martin Luther King preached on this parable, he saw the Samaritan in the story as a person of another race, which he said, in some quarters, would rule him out as a neighbor—and make him an enemy. For Dr. King, race is the critical component for understanding what this story means for us today. He imagined the robbers, not as individual bandits, but as representatives of racism itself, which robs its victims of their dignity, opportunity, wealth, and stability—like slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow. King saw the priest and Levite as white preachers, who act cautiously instead of courageously, who don’t have the guts to take a stand, and who often pass by and do nothing for those who are lying in the ditch.

As a white preacher, I felt the sting of King’s words this week. One of my white preacher friends, expressed it perfectly on Facebook when he said, “I watched two videos yesterday that I would have preferred not to see. Alton Sterling’s son crying for his Daddy in front of a crowd of reporters, and the second eye witness video of the shooting. If you are like me, you do not want to watch. This is precisely why we must. It is easy to pass by hurt that you think is not yours to feel. A lawyer once asked Jesus how he could know who his neighbor is, and in response, Jesus told a story about a man left for dead along the road, while others passed by. Perhaps some kept going because they could not see that treating some as less than human makes us all less than human. Perhaps they seized the privilege of not seeing, which is the privilege of those not left by the road by themselves. This is its own kind of death, a spiritual one…Today, God help us, there is another video of another left for dead. So now I am wondering: How much longer will we pass by?”

As I reflected on the hatred and violence that has taken place this week, it didn’t take long to realize that all of these violent shootings—all these tragic deaths—all these murders—have one thing in common. They are all symptoms of a common disease that plagues American society—the disease of white supremacy. It is America’s original sin and it is the common origin of all the violence that we’ve seen this week. It is the reason that so many people are chanting “Black Lives Matter” right now, because sadly, in America, black lives don’t matter as much as white lives. That is the definition of white supremacy. It is also the underlying reason why some police officers have been so quick on the trigger to shoot and kill black people and why many of the officers who kill innocent black people are never convicted. That is what white supremacy looks like. And it is also why a man could get so angry at the system that he would take up arms to murder the police. That is a reaction to a culture of white supremacy.
We have to acknowledge the problem. White supremacy is not just a problem for extremists—but for all of us. It is a part of our history, our society, it is in the air we breathe and the water we drink. Today, the racism of white supremacy is not as conscious or explicit as it once was, but that doesn’t mean things are any better. In her book *Blind Spot: Hidden Biases of Good People*, Harvard psychologist Mahzarin Banaji states that “scientists now believe that rather than disappearing, Americas’ racial prejudices have merely morphed into harder-to-see-forms. While milder in appearance than what came before in history, these evolved forms of prejudice are as potent, and often stronger, sources of racial discrimination.” That is why “good” law enforcement officers are still more likely to use lethal force on black men. It is because they were raised in an environment of white supremacy that has taught them, trained them, and conditioned them over time to fear black men more than white men—even though statistically, white men are just as dangerous. That is called unconscious or implicit racial bias—but it is just as deadly as the explicit forms our parents and grandparents dealt with.

In truth, the police are no more biased than the rest of society, but they have guns and a unique responsibility to protect and serve; and so we often see the catastrophic effects of their implicit racial biases lived out in the streets of black community. The long history of brutality, violence, discrimination, unfair treatment, and injustice by police toward black and brown people has broken relationships and destroyed trust; and trust is one of the hardest things to restore. Now, the injustice has gotten so out of hand that random police officers have become the targets of a violent backlash. The protestors and the police in Dallas were taking pictures and working with each other before the violence started. If you looked on Facebook afterward, you could see people choosing sides between black people and police—Black lives or blue lives—as if we have to have selective grief over the loss of innocent life. We can’t have selective grief. If we mourn for police and not for black lives, then we are not neighbors; and if we mourn for black lives and not for police, we are not neighbors. If we don’t mourn for both, we are like those who pass by on the other side and refuse to help the ones who are dying in the ditch.

I struggled this week to try and figure out how Jesus’ story of the Samaritan could speak to the violent and divided world that we are experiencing today. I kept trying to figure out who the characters were in our society today—who is the man in the ditch, who are the robbers, who is the priest and the Levite, who is the Samaritan? I tried different scenarios to see if they fit, but nothing worked. Then I realized the problem—we can’t fit this story to our society today because there are no Samaritans. We have people in the ditch—they are the victims of violence. We have robbers—they are the violent ones. We have priests and Levites—those who stand by do nothing. But where are the Samaritans? Where are the people at the intersection who are so moved with compassion that they are willing to care for the victims—no matter who they are? Where are the people who can bandage up the wounds of white supremacy, disinfect the scars of racial violence, and spare no expense to care for those who fall into the hands of bandits?

Many people today are asking, “What will it take to end this hatred and division? What will it take to end all of the violence? One poet, named Ric Hudgens, has offered an answer. “THIS IS WHAT IT WILL TAKE,” he said, “My eighty-year old neighbor, a man of deep, abiding faith, now frail and bent with age, who marched when marching made a difference, once upon a time, late at night, heard a yell from our alley. A black man screamed for mercy as policemen raised their clubs. My neighbor left his bed, entered the alley, and threw his body over his neighbor, making himself a shield. The police stopped. This is what it will take. White men throwing our bodies in between. Making them break us before they break our brothers.”

What the world truly needs right now are more Samaritans. As America continues to divide and polarize itself between right and left, Republican and Democrat, white and black, or blue and black—it is as if we are all like the lawyer in this story—hoping desperately for some limit to the concept of neighbor. Meanwhile, Jesus is telling us this story that not only expands the concept of neighbor...
beyond family, nationality, party politics, ethnicity, and religious identity, to include foreigners, strangers, aliens and even enemies. Then, after he expanded the definition of neighbor, Jesus flipped the entire concept on its head and asked the lawyer, “Which of these, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The lawyer could not bring himself to say that it was a Samaritan who was the neighbor, but he had to admit the neighbor was, “The one who showed mercy.” Then Jesus said, “Go and do likewise. Go and be like a Samaritan—like this one who is your enemy. Stop trying to define who is, or who is not, your neighbor. Just go and be a neighbor to others.”

According to Jesus, a neighbor is not someone who lives nearby or someone in our tribe. It is not about who our neighbor is, but how to be a neighbor, and being a neighbor is about love. In fact, a neighbor is not a state of being that others have in relation to us at all, but something that we become when we act in love toward another. Love in action—that is the definition of the Samaritan in this story and it is the definition of a neighbor. If we can just hold all the elements involved in the Samaritan’s actions in our imagination, then we will understand what it means to be a neighbor. He was moved with compassion for the man in the ditch, he stopped to help, risked his life on a dangerous road, he bandaged his wounds, he poured oil and wine on them, he put the man on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and spared no expense to pay someone to care for him. It was an act of true solidarity with a victim of violence—an extravagant gift of compassion and mercy—a blank check with no questions asked, to ensure that the man got all the help he needed. It was the epitome of true love.

In June of 1996, the KKK held a rally in Ann Arbor, Michigan. At the time, Ann Arbor was a progressive city, so hundreds of people gathered to show the KKK that they were not welcome in Ann Arbor. Most of the KKK members were on one side of a fence protected by police who were armed with tear gas, but one white middle-aged man was spotted among the crowd of anti-KKK protestors wearing a confederate flag t-shirt and a Nazi tattoo on his arm. Someone shouted, “There’s a Klansman in the crowd!” Suddenly, a group surrounded him, knocked him to the ground and started kicking and hitting him. But in the crowd that day, there was a young black woman named Keisha Thomas, who threw herself on top of the man who was supposed to be her enemy—a man who hated her very existence—and shielded him from the blows. She yelled up at the protestors “you can’t beat goodness into a person” until they stopped. She risked her life for a man who didn’t value hers. Later, when Keisha was being interviewed, she said, “Violence is violence. Nobody deserves to be hurt.” A few months later, she was approached by a young man in a coffee shop, who came up to her and said, “Thank you. That man who you threw yourself on top of was my dad.”

What does love look like in a world so filled with violence and hate? It looks like Ric’s 80-year-old neighbor—it looks like Keisha Thomas. You can call it solidarity. You can call it being a Samaritan. You can call it being a neighbor. Or you can simply call it love. As hard as it is, we must talk of love today, because only love can save us and only love can bring us healing. Jesus said, love is often found in those we would least expect it—sometimes it’s even in our enemies. It is embodied in those who refuse to pass by, who do not turn a blind eye, and who will not cross over to the other side of the road. It is embodied by those who are moved with compassion, those who risk their lives in solidarity with the victims of violence. It is embodied by those who give generously of their resources and possessions to care for those who are half-dead. It is embodied by those who are not content with a one-time fix, but offer their continuing support so those who are suffering can be fully healed and restored. It is embodied by those who take the time to examine their own implicit biases and unconscious beliefs, who work to overcome their fear of other people, and attack the evil of white supremacy. It is embodied by those who do not ask questions like “who is my neighbor?” but instead extend their compassion beyond their own race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and status. It is embodied by those who willingly sacrifice their own lives for others—those who put no limits on their love—and who never will. That is what love looks like in a world of violence and hate—that is what it means for us to be a neighbor and to love your neighbor as ourselves. And now, Jesus looks at us and says, “Go and do likewise.” Amen.