

## On Being a Neighbor

Sermon by John Strommen on Luke 10:25-37 March 5, 2017

It was late on a Friday night back in my student days. I was driving south on 35W, returning home from a night out with my buddies. I was driving a family hand me down: a '73 Pontiac station wagon, appropriately named "Safari" as its size and weight were roughly that of an African elephant.

Well, I got a flat tire that night. Not uncommon for me. It always seemed that dinosaur of car would regularly crush the air out of my tires. So I did what I had done many times before: I jacked up the car and started loosening the nuts on the bad tire. One of the nuts was particularly tight, so I cranked up a big macho heave, and as I did, the car rolled off the jack because I had forgotten to put the emergency brake on. But the jack remained engaged, so now it was jammed at a 45 degree angle between the car and the road. I tried to kick it out, but it wasn't going anywhere.

This was long before cell phones, mind you, so all I could do was start flagging cars to stop and help me. Several things stuck out to me as I did this: there were a lot of nice cars on the road, and as they came near to me, I realized they had great acceleration, too.

"C'mon," I muttered. "Don't be afraid of me. I'm just a seminary student! I might even put in a good word for you with you know who." I had to admit, though, I probably wouldn't have stopped to help me, either.

I was wishing God would send an angel to help me. And then it happened. A car pulled over, but not one of the nice ones. A car straight of a post-apocalyptic film like "The Road Warrior" or "Mad Max: Fury Road." You know, no muffler, jacked up in the back, very rough gun metal gray finish. If cars were members of the animal kingdom, this one would be a predator. And if so, that would make my car (and me) an injured member of the herd.

I braced myself when the car door opened, wondering who and how many would get out of the car. I soon got my answer and it was a good news/bad news kind of thing. The good news was that there was only one person and that person was a she. The bad news was it looked like she could beat me up. She wore black leather from head to toe, her hair was dyed black, she had deep eye shadow, she was about my height and she was not smiling. I had asked for an angel, not a "Hell's Angel"!

Then she got to me and she said in the nicest voice, "Need some help?"

So I said yes, I did need help, and I explained what a fool I had been. She had a jack with her, we got the car up, got the flat tire off, put on the spare. And the whole time, she was the nicest person. Turns out she didn't even know Mad Max. She did seem to be in a hurry to leave, though, after I invited her to a Bible study.

And who was the neighbor to John on that night? The heavy metal angel in black leather - not all the respectable people driving nice cars. So appearances can be deceiving. You can't see someone's heart until they *do something* to reveal their heart.

I'm sure you already recognized this story as a modern telling of the Good Samaritan, if not quite as dramatic as the original. In the original telling, Jesus was being politely attacked by a lawyer of God's law, who was trying to trap and embarrass him. Well, the lawyer wasn't successful, as Jesus got the upper hand, but then the lawyer tried to turn the tables one last time. Jesus had just summarized the law by saying, "Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself." And the lawyer asked, "And who is my neighbor?"

Tough question, since in this culture, there were all kinds of rules about who you were supposed to love. For instance, Jews did not mingle with or help out Samaritans, who were thought not worthy of Jewish attention or resources. Likewise, there all kinds of social norms discouraging interaction or help for those with serious health issues or social stigmas of various kinds. There were simply so many who were on the outside looking in. So the lawyer was going to try and get Jesus in trouble by violating a social norm.

Then Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. An unidentified man is lying beaten on the side of the road, but the Jewish audience probably assumes it was one of them. Then two important people, a priest and a Levite, walk by, or should I say "walk on by." They are schooled in charity and love, but they are either too busy or they simply don't want to get their hands dirty.

Then a Samaritan man comes by and of course, he does what the priest and Levite failed to do: help the man who was severely beaten. He gives him water to drink, treats his wounds, binds them up, puts him on his donkey and brings him to an inn to recuperate, where he also pays for the man's stay. So, this guy delivered big time.

Now Jesus puts the question back to the lawyer: "Tell me, which one of these men was a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?"

And the lawyer says, "The one who showed him mercy."

Wouldn't it be easier to just say, "the Samaritan." The Samaritan was a neighbor to the man. But the lawyer can't get himself to say, "The Samaritan." Any guesses why? To Jesus' Jewish audience listening to this story, including the lawyer, they would be stunned at how this story was told. A lowly *Samaritan* is the moral example of goodness and love?

Or like I might have said that one night on 35W, "Someone who looks and dresses like *her* and drives around in a car like *that* - *she* does the good deed? You're kidding."

Here Jesus is reminding his listeners, and that includes us, by the way, that those whom we may judge disparagingly because of race, religion or lifestyle, may, on any given day, put any one of us to shame with their compassion and sacrifice. And they may even do it consistently!

And by the way, whether they know it or not, God is at work in them when they do so.

But not only did the Samaritan do the compassionate thing, there's another layer here to neighborliness that only the Samaritan could have revealed. In Jesus' Jewish culture at this time, *quid pro quo* was alive

and well in social relations. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. If I help you, or invite you to dinner or something, I expect you to return the favor.

Okay, think about this scenario. If a Samaritan man helped a man everyone there probably assumed was Jewish, would the Samaritan man then be expecting a sweet return on his neighborliness? Not at all. He could expect nothing, because of his lack of social standing. So why did he pour out his heart and resources for the beaten man? Because that's what love does, it doesn't calculate reward, it *just responds* to a neighbor in need.

"Go and do likewise," said Jesus. Did you catch that? No reward. Just do it. In fact, did you notice that Jesus never answered the lawyer's original question, "who *is* my neighbor?" Jesus is telling us that it is wrong to be debating abstract definitions of who my neighbor is, to be calculating our *neighborliness* and it's boundaries. What counts is *being a neighbor, acting in love*, in a way that actually helps someone in need.

We live in a country where many think the purpose of religion is to get into heaven. It's not. It's to get us to love our neighbor. Our salvation is to be saved from self-absorption and self-righteousness into community and compassion, where we are not calculating who our neighbor really is so that we can have an excuse to exclude some people from our sphere of goodness, for whatever reason.

The last couple days I've gotten caught up in a Facebook thread discussion/debate. Perhaps you've seen that in the new Beauty and the Beast film coming out soon, someone in the film is coming out, too. The character, Le Fou, will be portrayed as gay. So, predictably, many on the evangelical right are up in arms over this. And so, the net effect here is that Le Fou is a bigger monster than the beast and worse than Gaston. Sadly, this just reinforces the judgment so many gay people consistently feel from Christians. What they usually don't feel is love.

Eventually there was a Facebook responder who cut to the chase. She wrote that Christians should let God do the judging and focus on loving our neighbor instead. I think that gets it right, for the most part. It's pretty clear the story of the Good Samaritan is not only a story about neighborly love, it's the story of how God regards us. God is all in. His love for us knows no boundaries. This is the love that sets us free - free to love our neighbor! How will you be a neighbor today? Amen.