

Who Is My Neighbor?

John Wilkinson

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

July 10, 2022

Luke 10: 25-37

Two Princeton University social psychologists, John Darley and Dan Batson, conducted a well-known experiment with Princeton Theological Seminary students in the 1970's. Perhaps you've read about it. The study observed how seminary students conducted themselves when asked to deliver a sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan, which we just heard.

The students were to prepare the sermon in one location on campus and preach it in a studio in a building across campus, to be evaluated by their supervisors. The researchers were curious about whether time pressure would affect the seminary students' helpful nature. As each student finalized their sermon and headed across campus, the researchers inflicted an element of time constraint upon them by giving them one of three instructions:

1. "You're late. They were expecting you a few minutes ago...You'd better hurry. It shouldn't take but just a minute."
2. "The (studio) assistant is ready for you, so please go right over."
3. "It'll be a few minutes before they're ready for you, but you might as well head on over. If you have to wait over there, it shouldn't be long."

As each student walked from the preparation classroom to the studio, they encountered a “victim” in a deserted alleyway, similar to the wounded traveler in the parable of the Good Samaritan. This “victim” (who was actually an associate of the experimenters) appeared destitute, was slouched and coughing and clearly in need of assistance. Researchers were interested in determining if their imposed time pressure affected the seminarians’ response to a distressed stranger. Ten percent of the students in the high-hurry situation stopped to help the victim. Forty-five percent of the students in the intermediate-hurry and 63% of the students in the low-hurry situations helped the victim.

The researchers concluded, “A person not in a hurry may stop and offer help to a person in distress. A person in a hurry is likely to keep going. Ironically, they are likely to keep going even if they are hurrying to speak on the parable of the Good Samaritan, thus inadvertently confirming the point of the parable... Thinking about the Good Samaritan did not increase helping behavior, but being in a hurry decreased it.”

Writes commentator Nagesh Belludi: “The perception of time pressure or ‘having limited time’ resulted in behaviors incongruent to their education and career: the devotion to help others. Time pressure triggered these well-intentioned students to behave in ways that, upon reflection, they would find disgraceful. The weight of a time constraint caused the students to put their immediate concern of being on time before the wellbeing of someone in need.”

Perhaps it is a lack of time, or a perceived lack of time, that causes us to fail to act when we encounter someone in need. Perhaps it is not that, or more than that.

It is perhaps *the* iconic gospel text. We've labeled it the "Good Samaritan," which is right. But that label can fail to identify how radical, how revolutionary, the story is. The "good" of Good Samaritan indicates a kind of politeness and civility, which is certainly needed right now. There are hospitals and churches named for this parable, plays and poems and countless paintings. Every act of transformative hospitality, of welcoming the stranger, caring for the other, risking comfort and status and life itself, springs from this gospel story, which is not only good, but merciful and just and compassionate and holy.

It is perhaps *the* iconic gospel text. So many entry points. Who are we in the story? Who is Jesus in the story? Who is the church in the story? The one beaten and robbed? The one doing the beating and the robbing? The ones who pass by? The one who finally stops? Who are we in the story?

We forget that the parable, with a presumed familiarity, is actually a parable within an encounter, an encounter that begins with a question. A lawyer, asking either from an earnest and real sense of personal curiosity, or, more likely, per the story, seeking to show his cleverness by tripping Jesus up, asks Jesus a question. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Was he interested in his own salvation, or, perhaps, was he

interested in leading Jesus to a twisted, convoluted place, even a place that would have Jesus in conflict with his own tradition?

Jesus did what Jesus does – he transformed the tradition by claiming the tradition. He reaches back and responds from Deuteronomy – “love God with heart, soul, strength and mind. And love neighbor as self.” Salvation, if that is even the right question, has less to do with right theological beliefs or prescribed religious practices, but with love, and service.

The lawyer knew the textbook answer, but now he was hooked. Jesus had drawn him in. “And who IS my neighbor?” Who is my neighbor?

How would you answer that question? We know how Jesus did. With this iconic parable, this good Samaritan who is more than good, but who risks to show mercy.

How would you answer the question? The one who is nearby and familiar, who gives aid to a little kid who has scraped his knee in a bike accident (see the children’s sermon)? Yes, but more so, the one who is different, a threat, a risk, the other, the one who expands our understandings of who we are and what we are called to do, who calls us beyond our comfort zones to acts of profound care and compassion.

The Samaritan, who was more than good, it would seem, risked his life and limb for the other, one of different race and ethnic heritage and religion. Others walked on by, including those with impressive religious credentials, displaying varying senses of

distaste and inconvenience and moral superiority that led them to the other side of the road.

Who is my neighbor? How would you answer that question in your own heart and mind? We will stipulate that there was nothing good about the pandemic. But some of you reported that during that time, you came to know your neighbors more and more. You organized events where you would gather at the ends of driveways to visit with one another. Socially distanced happy hours or holiday celebrations. Our lives are such, our schedules, paces, work and school and soccer/baseball practice, piano/swimming lessons, that we don't even know our neighbors – our real-life, actual physical neighbors anymore.

How would we answer that question as a congregation? Who is our neighbor? Residents of the houses and apartments nearby? The shopkeepers just down the hill from us? Those showing up in the ER next door? Or is it more expansive than that? Springfield and Whitemarsh Township, Erdenheim, Ft. Washington, Lafayette Hill, Ambler, Wyncote, Wyndmoor, Glenside? Or do we travel south on Germantown Avenue, and if so, how far? Is our neighbor a geographical designation or more than that, different than that? It is likely that those who shared the end of the driveway pandemic happy hours with us looked like us. But that doesn't seem to be what Jesus had in mind, not at all. Of course we begin with connecting with those nearest to us – whether on a personal level or a church level we need to know, and care for, those nearest to us. But Jesus' parable, his response to the clever lawyer, suggests something broader, more

radical, more transformational. The neighbor in his story has no common characteristics with the one cared for – different racially and ethnically and religiously. The ones with similar profile just walked on by; not very neighborly. The different one took the risk and was the true neighbor. What does that mean for each of us? What does that mean for the church?

I grew up in small-town Ohio. We had two hospitals – Bethesda and Good Samaritan. Good Samaritan – what was called Good Sam – was the Roman Catholic hospital, originally operated by nuns. More recently as health care evolved, Good Sam and Bethesda merged, now called Genesis Hospital. I love the notion of a hospital being named after a biblical parable, but in a sense, that sanitizes the story too much, makes it about the care of one who shows up, for whom care is expected, maybe even paid for.

The theologian Gustavo Gutierrez writes: “Who is my neighbor? The neighbor is not (the one) whom I find in my path, but rather (the one) in whose path I place myself, (the one) whom I approach and actively seek.”

Beverly Gaventa writes that this parable is “not about secular do-goodism – the favored fortunate doing good to the unattractive, less fortunate.” Gaventa reminds us that the Samaritan would have been the despised person in this story, the fill-in-the-blank “other” person, “different” person, who enacts the faith that is not his own when the ones who claim that faith leave it at the side of the road. She writes that by making the Samaritan the hero, as it were, Jesus “destroys any parochial understandings of God

that presumes God's interest is limited to me and my family." (Texts for Preaching C, page 428)

Six days after Independence Day, six days after a gunman shot and killed 7 people at a Highland Park Fourth of July parade – a community just 15 minutes from where we lived in Chicago, I have been thinking a lot, and perhaps you have too, about the implications of this parable. Maybe you didn't know you were thinking about it, but my hunch is you were, as you read the headlines and processed the stories, and thought of what it means to be a citizen or a patriot or a neighbor. They are connected, interrelated, of course. We all carry each label – citizen, patriot, neighbor – even as each label is being re-defined in ways that don't breed the kind of patriotism or citizenship or neighborliness that we've valued.

Last Sunday, my friend Thomas Are, who serves as the pastor of the Village Presbyterian Church in Kansas City, preached this: "We need people devoted to building the good life together. It's the harder choice. Embracing cynicism and conspiracy is much easier. Too much of our common life is defined by patriotism that traffics in shaming others, in dismissing others, in lying to others...We can choose a better way. Love what God loves and love this country but let our patriotism be informed by citizenship." Let our patriotism be informed by citizenship, Tom Are says, and to that I would add let both our patriotism and citizenship be informed by neighborliness. This is the story that claims us, the values that form us. It can be simple neighborliness with the person next door, or the person who shares a pew with us. That's a start. Fred Rogers, he of "Mister

Rogers' Neighborhood," and a Presbyterian minister (and, if I haven't mentioned it, a seminary classmate of my dad!), spoke to that: "The purpose of life is to listen – to yourself, to your neighbor, to your world and to God and, when the time comes, to respond in as helpful a way as you can find ... from within and without."

Read the Good Samaritan story again. And again. And place yourself in it, in each of the characters. The lawyer testing Jesus. The man attacked on the road. The proper religious authorities who passed by, either by disgust or indifference or a perception that they didn't have enough time. The Samaritan. Read the story again and ask the lawyer's question again: "who is my neighbor?"

Fred Rogers said that "We're all on a journey – each one of us. And if we can be sensitive to the person who happens to be our neighbor, that, to me, is the greatest challenge as well as the greatest pleasure." Our greatest challenge as well as the greatest pleasure. Jesus called it eternal life. And it begins right here, and right now. Amen.