

Who Are Our Neighbors?
Luke 10:25-37
July 11, 2010—Covenant Presbyterian
The Rev. Catherine Robinson

The story begins

when a lawyer stands up
to ask Jesus a question.

The lawyer was *testing* Jesus,
the story says—

maybe to trick him,
maybe just to figure out
if Jesus was the real McCoy.

But let's not be too hard on the poor lawyer!
(No lawyer jokes today!)

Whatever the reasons for the test,
the lawyer's question is a pretty good one.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

That's a question that a lot of people ask.

In fact, as one preacher points out,

"To many people of faith,
it's the most important question
of all.

What do I have to do
to get on God's good list?

What things must I accomplish
to merit a hand-inscribed invitation
to heaven?

What must I do
to inherit eternal life?"

(Scott Black Johnston, "The Reading Test", Day 1, July 11, 2004,
<http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=8>)

Well, it's interesting

how Jesus responds to the test.

Notice that

Jesus doesn't give the lawyer a blueprint answer.

No simple, step-by-step plan for salvation here.

Instead, Jesus answers the lawyer's question
with a question.

(So, what did you expect a rabbi to do?)

And now—did you notice this?—

all of a sudden, the *lawyer*
is the one being tested!

Jesus says,

"So, what's in the law?"
 You've been to school!
 You know the answer!

And sure enough,
 the lawyer nails the answer.
 He shuffles through his mental file
 of notes from law school,
 and he spits the answer right out—
 the double command
 to love God with everything you have,
 and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Summa cum laude.

Give the guy a gold star.

"Do that and you will live," says Jesus.
 So, that could be the end of test, right?
 Turn in your papers and go home.

But the lawyer isn't finished.
 There's something else
 nagging at him.

"Do it,"
 says Jesus.

"Do this,
 and you will live."

"Wait just a billable minute"

Scott Black Johnston imagines the lawyer saying.

"How big of a job is that going to be?"

This could get tricky.

It could take over my whole life.

Love God and neighbor?

I need a little clarification here, Jesus.

Tell me, who counts?

Who is my neighbor?"

(op. cit.)

I really don't think
 that the lawyer is being evil or narrow minded
 by asking this question.
 The story says that he wanted to justify himself.
 That means that he wanted to be sure
 that he was getting it right.

He's like we are.

We can see right away—
 this business of loving neighbor is a huge job!
 We can't do it all!

So, Jesus,

you have to give us a little more
 to work with here!
 Are you talking about the panhandlers
 on the entrances
 to the highway?
 What about people stopped with flat tires
 on the side of the road?
 What if it's dark?
 What if I'm in a shady part of town?
 Does this include
 my infuriating co-worker?
 What about the church member
 who drives me crazy!
 Who is my neighbor?
 Do you know what?
 Nearly every conversation
 I've had about this story during the last week,
 has basically led to this question.
 (You should have seen the chatter
 in my email lectionary discussion group!
 On and on, people were going
 about somebody's flat tire....
 Good grief!
 But more about preacher types later!)
 The fact is that this business of loving neighbor
 just sounds too hard!
 Too hard to figure out,
 and too hard to do!
 Who is my neighbor?
 And Jesus' response is so familiar
 that nearly any of us could tell the story.
 A man is beaten,
 robbed,
 and left for dead.
 And now, we go back
 to the preacher types.
 Here comes a priest.
 He does the wrong thing.
 But wait a minute!
 The law does say to help those in need.
 But the law also says, don't touch a dead person.
 So the priest is probably thinking
 that he would have to go back to Jerusalem
 to be purified

if he touched this man
 who might be dead.
 What's a priest to do?
 Then, here comes the Levite—
 another religious official.
 He, too, passes by.
 It's not looking good for the preacher types.
 This week,
 I read in a couple of places
 about an experiment
 that was conducted with students at Princeton Seminary. The
 researchers gathered a group of students in a classroom
 and gave them an assignment—
 Go and record a talk
 about the Parable of the Good Samaritan.
 The students were told that
 the recordings were going to be done in a building
 on the other side of the campus.
 And because of a very tight schedule,
 they needed to hurry to that building.
 Well, it was set up ahead of time that,
 on the path to the other building
 there would be an actor,
 slumped in an alley,
 coughing and suffering.
 So, what do you think the seminary students did?
 They were on their way
 to make a presentation about the Good Samaritan.
 And now, all of a sudden,
 they encounter an actual person in need
 (or, an actual actor in need!).
 Well, in fact, almost all of them
 rushed right past the hurting man.
 One student even stepped *over* the man's body
 as he was hurrying off to teach
 about the Parable of the Good Samaritan!
 (Tomas G. Long, "Meeting the Good Samaritan," Day 1 sermon for July 15,
 2007, <http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=641>)
 Wow!
 Proof positive
 that the spirit of the Priest and the Levite
 is still alive.
 But also proof positive of how hard it is
 to do what Jesus says.
 So, back to the first century.

Probably, the priest and the Levite
 would have been in the list
 of top ten desirable neighbors.

And probably, in the bottom ten,
 would have been the Samaritans.

The Samaritans
 were the disreputable shunned cousins.
 They *had* been worshipers of the true God,
 but they had strayed.

So, watch

what this despised outsider does.
 His generosity is amazing!
 Extravagant!

Jesus uses more words
 to describe the Samaritan's giving
 than he uses to tell the rest of the story.
 Oil to soften his wound.
 Wine as an antiseptic.
 The near corpse
 put on the back of the horse,
 so the Samaritan walks.

It's an incredible amount of generosity.

Well, now Jesus pulls us away from the road to Jericho
 and back to the conversation
 about neighbors.

And listen very carefully
 to the question Jesus asks the lawyer!

"Who," asks Jesus,
 "has acted like a neighbor *to the victim?*"

Did you catch that?

No longer is the question

"Who is *my* neighbor?!"

We're not talking anymore
 about who counts and who doesn't count!

Jesus is thinking about the guy in the ditch!

And the guy in the ditch is the one
 who gets to decide who the neighbor is.

Who was the neighbor to the guy in the ditch?

That's what Jesus wants to know.

You and I are so frantic

with worrying about
 how on earth

we can ever be like the Samaritan.
 How can we ever measure up?

But if we jump into that,
 we miss what Jesus has to say
 about neighbors.
 It's not about which people *we* have to help
 and which people *we* don't have to help.
 It's about the guy in the ditch,
 and about which one was actually the neighbor
 to *him*.

The lawyer was worried
 about having to love
 too many neighbors.

And so are we.

That could flat wear us out,
 could absolutely burn us out.
 Compassion fatigue, some call it.
 But when Jesus is finishes with the story,
 the question is not
 "how many neighbors do I have to love?"
 The question is,
 "Who has loved as a neighbor?"
 The neighbor
 is not the one
I'm supposed to love.
 The neighbor is the one
 who's doing the loving.
 And the one who is doing the loving
 turns out to be
 the one we least expect.

The lawyer was worried,
 that all of these neighbors
 could drain the pocketbook,
 could drain the energy.

And so are we.

But if we let him,
 Jesus will turn this worry
 into a puzzled gladness.
 The neighbor is not the one
 who is a burden.
 The neighbor is the one
 who is picking people up
 and restoring people to life.
 So, before we get all agitated
 about how we need to be Better Sams,
 and worrying about how we will ever do that

because we're already worn out enough as it is,
 there is another experience that we need to notice:
 the experience of being the one in need
 and of receiving aid from neighbors...
 sometimes altogether unlikely neighbors.

If we don't remember frequently our experiences
 of being helped out of the ditch,
 do you know what will happen?

We will always see the neighbor
 as a burden
 to bear,
 as a burden
way too heavy to bear.

But once we discover
 that the most unlikely neighbor
 can have compassion on us,
 can surprise us with caring,
 and can lift us out of the ditch,
 then neighbors will never look the same again.

So, what are your experiences?
 What are your stories of people who,
 to your utter amazement,
 proved to be a neighbor to you?

Preach to yourself for a moment.
 Remember the neighbors
 who have lifted you out of ditches
 and brought you to healing.

And if no one else comes to mind,
 then just remember Jesus—
 despised,
 rejected,
 an outcast and a troublemaker,
 who was beaten,
 whipped,
 stripped,
 and left on a cross to die,
 that we might have life.

Remember Jesus, our neighbor.
 Remember and rejoice
 in all of these signs
 of God's surprising grace.

And also,
 stand ready
 to discover other

unexpected neighbors.
Then, with your head on straight
about who your neighbors *really* are,
it will be much less of a problem to
"Go and do likewise."

Thanks be to God
for the surprising grace of God.

Amen.