

“TURNING TOWARD MY NEIGHBOR”

Matthew 5:13-16; Luke 10:25-37

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I love my job. I don't just mean that I find my work meaningful and rewarding. I mean, I enjoy it: working here at Westminster with you, learning together what it means to follow Jesus, sharing with you a common vision of justice and compassion, just being part of this faith community committed to the care of one another. Not all pastors have it this good. Some have to figure out how to motivate the congregation. Some have to figure out where to find funds to pay their own salary. Some spend more time mediating conflict than organizing ministry.

Whether a pastor enjoys their place of employment or not, there is a tendency for the work life to consume the greater part of a pastor's thoughts and day. I remember feeling a great deal of sympathy for workers when companies were going through this period of “downsizing” by taking the work of one employee whom they had let go, and adding it to the workload of another they had kept. I think we're seeing a similar thing in this period of low unemployment. There are a lot of overworked employees. I've heard lots of comments about poor service in restaurants recently. The kitchen didn't get the order right. Service was too slow or too rushed. The waiter was cranky.

It doesn't matter whether you work a lot of hours because you have bills to pay or because you love what you do, overwork can make us inattentive to the needs of others. Sometimes it's our spouse or our children who get the short end of the stick. Sometimes we're just less aware of things happening around us: the need for more affordable housing, the impact of hunger on a child's ability to learn, the suffering of innocents in a war, the implicit bias that limits the economic opportunities of the poor and the stranger. Some of these things are systemic like being unmindful of our carbon footprint and others are more personal like a forgotten birthday or anniversary, or a careless comment. Some are things we should attend to beyond our own circles of concern and some are internal to our personal communities.

Brian Zahn says this about the story of the Good Samaritan: “As followers of Jesus we are not commanded to love our nation. Rather, we are commanded to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbor as ourself – whether we are referring to the modern nation-state or its ancient meaning of ethnicity – is not a proper category for a priority of love. To prioritize love of one's nation-state or one's ethnicity will almost of necessity put us at odds with the commands we have received from Jesus Christ. We are called to love God supremely and then to love those around us with a co-suffering love – and we are to do this regardless of our neighbor's citizenship or ethnicity.”

The priest and the Levite, his assistant, likely shared an ethnicity with the injured man beside the road. They were perhaps on their way to do service in the temple, and could not afford to be contaminated by someone who might be dead. Their jobs or roles made

them cautious about one of their own. They looked, and they saw the man, we are told; but only close enough to see the distraction he would be. They may have been concerned that he was dead, and later in court, they would probably claim that, but it doesn't say that. It doesn't say what they believed about him. All we know is that they did not come close enough to see their responsibility for him. Too busy? Too much of a hurry? Too much love of their job? Too much worry about getting their hands dirty? They were not a neighbor. Jesus and the lawyer are in agreement on that. They did not come near.

It's not uncommon within faith communities for a person to suffer silently with no one else aware of the pain or difficult they're experiencing in life. In our culture we foster a certain respect for a person's privacy and some places this gets in the way of developing deep, intimate and helpful relationships. I'm not suggesting that there is no place for privacy, but that we need to bring alongside that respect a certain curiosity. We need to come close enough to see what the other is willing to show is.

For centuries, gay and lesbian followers hid their sexual orientation from the church, because the church in attempting to preserve its purity stood in judgment of them, as much as declared them "dead" to the faith. If the church had looked closer, they would have seen people of deep faith in need of welcome. When Europeans began to colonize this land, they saw only heathen savages instead of children of God with a deep respect for creation. So much harm born of arrogance, born of a misplaced love. Jesus never asked for his followers to conquer the world for him. He asks us to open our eyes, to come near, and to see, truly see our neighbor: the person sitting next to you, the person sharing in a ministry of the church, the person worshipping on line with us. If we cannot come near and see the child of God among us, how will we see the neighbor not yet a part of us? Turning toward my neighbor is the first step to seeing and loving my neighbor. But you already know this!

But did you know that there are strangers, maybe even people you think of as enemies, who are willing to come alongside you while you're lying "half-dead" in the road. I consider myself half-dead to the world. A long time ago I considered homosexuality a sin. I changed my mind about that before I met Bob, but he was the one who made me alive to the reality that a gay man could be as faithful as any straight man and that he was better equipped and gifted by God for leadership in the church than the bishop who denied him that privilege. Too stuck on "correct theology" to see his neighbor's calling.

I was half-dead to the experience and suffering of people of color until a woman whom I had met through ISAAC, told me about the talk she gave to her children about how to behave around police officers: hands clearly visible on the wheel or in the air, speech respectful, etc. I was half-dead to the unhoused, but they've been making me more aware of false assumptions. At the very least I'm starting to see that homelessness is just about problem solving – fixing a broken housing system – but more about relationship building.

I think it's really important for us to see ourselves as the man lying beside the road waiting for someone, the least likely someone, to tend our wounds. Wounds like the desire to be

in control all the time, the drive for success and self-sufficiency, the pride in our clan, the sense of superiority, the many loves that shut us out of healthy relationships.

But I haven't yet come to the main point of Jesus' story. These are insights based on the minor characters. "Go and do likewise. Do as the Samaritan!" says Jesus, "If you want to live, do this!"

First of all, we need to do away with the adjective. Good Samaritan laws are about people who go above and beyond expectations. Jesus does not call the Samaritan good, because the story is about what every human being needs to do in order for it to be said that they are alive. This is just what God expects people to do for each other: to take notice, to go near, and to tend the needs that we discover. Eyes open, curiosity engaged, and love embraced. Jesus turns the lawyer's question on its head. Instead of "who is my neighbor?" he asks, "To whom are you a neighbor?"

So setting theology aside, silencing the distractions long enough to take a look around, what do we see? Where are those being harmed in life? And what's the nature of their suffering? What are the wounds that need to be bound up? Coming near means asking questions like this and others. Coming near is what God does in Jesus Christ and what his followers are all about. There is no way to be salt to the earth and light to the world without getting close to people. And by the way, notice that Matthew uses broad, inclusive terms that don't limit his followers to concern just for the faith community.

We need to really see people, both as individuals and as the systems in which they are experiencing harm. Coming near means seeing the child of God who has a claim on us and seeing the wounds, the source of harm. You can't really help someone marginalized by the color of their skin or their ethnicity without trying to understand the systems that threaten their living.

It takes a lot of love to direct our energy toward the healing of deep and complex wounds. But this is the kind of love that leads to living, to being truly alive in God's world. It doesn't happen overnight. There are mistakes and missteps, but there are no pleasures deeper than being a neighbor and breathing life into a stranger now becoming a friend. That pleasure begins when we turn toward a neighbor and give what we have to satisfy their need. Love your neighbor. Life begins there. That's why Mr. Rogers opened every show by looking straight into the camera, smiling broadly, and saying, "Hi neighbor!" as though he were seeing the child through the television.

I love my job because I think that's what we're trying to do here, not perfectly, not every minute, but mostly... learning to be neighbors to one another and to a world much in need of tending. Amen.

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