

“Loving Your Neighbor”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 2, 2026

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Isaiah 55:6-13

Luke 10:25-37

Summer Worship Series – *A Curriculum of Love: Deepening our Love for God, our Neighbors, and Ourselves*

Introduction

Parables are meant to challenge their listener’s assumptions through vivid and often unexpected storytelling, provoking us to think and act differently; thus, breaking through the boundaries of our understanding. This parable, commonly known as the “Good Samaritan,” has become so familiar over time that its sense of strangeness and surprise may appear lost; through its frequent retellings over the centuries, the sharpness of its point has been smoothed out.

The lawyer approaching Jesus was asking for boundaries about who should be considered a neighbor. If neighbors must be loved as oneself, surely there must be limits; but, Jesus refuses to set any. Instead of describing who is a neighbor, he points out how to be a neighbor. He switches the conversation from our neighbor as an object you decide to love to how you embody being a neighbor yourself.

Read Luke 10:25-37

If you’ve been following along with our summer sermon series, entitled: *A Curriculum of Love: Deepening our Love for God, for our Neighbors, and for Ourselves*, then you may well be relieved we have finally moved on from the last four weeks of focusing on loving yourself to today’s theme of loving our neighbors. For many of us, all that talk about love for ourselves can seem uncomfortably self-indulgent. Others of us might have, in our heads, an ongoing loop of self-criticism that can prevent us from feeling very loved or lovable.

But, loving others – especially when we are challenged to think about how widely the boundary of the definition of neighbor should be cast – can seem more daunting than doable. We all have our implicit biases and blind sides: we are

trained to sometimes think in terms of us and them, of insiders and outsiders, of excluding or overpowering others. Many of our boys and young men are being bombarded with the message that being “masculine” means entitlement to a superior rank above women. Many have cringed or cried out in protest against the rampant racial profiling of people of color. Our denomination’s General Assembly recently passed a resolution condemning the threat of White Christian Nationalism, which reads, in part:

The church rejects any ideology that seeks to establish Christianity as a privileged or dominant force through the power of the state, or that conflates religious identity with national, racial, or ethnic supremacy. Such ideologies, in all their forms, are incompatible with the example and teachings of Jesus Christ, constitute a theological error, undermine the church’s faithful witness, and are contrary to the church.¹

If your worthiness and identity is found in something as shallow as your race, gender, class, or religion then anyone who is a threat to that position can be seen as an enemy.

As our series author Siri Stromann says, “Jesus seemed to have the unique ability to meet a person and ‘see’ them in the fullest sense. He saw their gifts as well as their hurts and blind sides. From the Samaritan woman at the well to the Rich Man asking Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus loved people. In Matthew, Jesus has dinner with anyone who invites him, including Pharisees who only want to argue with him. He even had the capacity to sit at the Last Supper with his closest friends, knowing they would betray, deny, and abandon him.”²

Jesus, here, offers a parable that dismantles the very notion of boundaries and exposes the false divisions we draw between “us” and “them.” Samaritans and Jews were divided by their history, culture, and theology, yet Jesus declares that their obligation to love supersedes all of it. In doing so, this story confronts the sin of racism – and related false ideologies – for what they really are: attempts to carve out exceptions to God’s command to love, to create boundaries where none should

¹ RUS-01 from the 227th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, USA

² Siri Stromann, *A Curriculum of Love*

be. The Kingdom of God allows no such divisions, and neither do the scriptures, which call us to love our neighbor as ourselves. And so, like the lawyer, we are left not with the question of “Who is my neighbor?” but with a much harder one: “Will I choose to be a neighbor?”

Steven Fine, professor of Jewish history at Yeshiva University, gives us perspective on the Samaritan and the people who are called by that name even today. “The story,” writes Fine, “is not just about helping a stranger but also helping and being helped by someone who looks like an enemy.” Today, Samaritans are the only people to hold both Palestinian and Israeli identity cards. “Samaritans are not Jews or Arabs,” he writes. “They are both and neither – all at the same time.”³

The traveler in Jesus’ story cannot save himself. There is no cell phone to call his friends, no roadside assistance from the local highway patrol. He is beaten and naked, vulnerable and alone. We do not know the man’s social class, ethnicity, or religion. He could have been a God Fearer like the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts or the author we call Luke, a Samaritan like the man who stops to help him, or a Jew like the men who pass him by. That he is robbed of his clothing indicates his clothes were of value to the robbers, of how much value we do not know. We don’t know if the victimized man had any possessions beyond the clothes on his back. We know nothing about his moral character.

Both the priest and Levite saw the injured man and avoided helping him; they moved to the other side of the road, perhaps for fear they too would be victimized. The longer the victim’s wounds are ignored, the less likely it is he will survive. Imagine how hope was dashed inside the battered traveler as the priest and Levite pass by; or how the injured one may have said to himself as he watches the foreigner approach, “Please, God, not him, send somebody else.”

Jesus’ response to the lawyer’s question redirects his concern from eternal life to this life. Our first concern should be saving lives in our lifetimes. When the Samaritan carried, clothed, housed, fed, and financially supported his neighbor, he turned abstract piety into love for neighbor, which was shown through tangible acts of reparation and restitution.

³ As quoted by Rober P. Hoch-Yidokodiltona from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Sometimes we are the Samaritan; other times, admittedly, more like the priest and Levite. We must strive to more consistently practice the love of our neighbors, which is motivated by love of God and love of self. As we have learned, self-love is not egocentric or individualistic, nor is it obsessed only with self-preservation; instead, it takes risks for vulnerable and violated people living in the borderless neighborhood we inhabit. Historical and current inequities in our society allow those with privilege and wealth to choose and limit their neighbors. The man in the ditch reminds us what it feels like to be forgotten by others; and, sadly, this scene of being passed by is replayed over and over again in the minds of oppressed and dying among us.⁴

Some people are pretty easy to love. The truth is, though, some people aren't. When Jesus, at the conclusion of the parable, asks the lawyer who was a "neighbor" to the person who had been robbed, beaten, and left to die, the lawyer can't quite bring himself to say the word "Samaritan" out loud; replying instead, "the one who had mercy on him." The lawyer's muted response to Jesus' question shows just how difficult this truth about neighbor-love would have been for him to hear – as it, likewise, can be for us.

Jesus, in his interactions with women and children, lepers and outcasts of any kind – even Samaritans – shows us a different way to see and treat them. He refused to embrace our imposed categories and hierarchies. Prejudice and biases are so common, so seemingly normal, that we struggle to understand what the world would be without them. But Jesus invites us into a new way of seeing; one that strips away the false identities that divide us. Many of the parables that Jesus shared were subversive, flipping the expected heroes and villains on their heads, all to get people to see one another differently. If Jesus can get our attention, pointing out how we see one another as being flawed, then he can help us begin to repent and reconcile and rewire our hearts and minds to love our neighbors – both those easy and not so easy to love.

Let us pray: *Dear Jesus, may we see one another the way you see us. Show us where we have dismissed and diminished certain people. Open our hearts so that we may learn to love one another more fully and authentically. Amen.*

⁴ Mitzi Smith from *WorkingPreacher.com*