

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on August 7, 2022

THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

You shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.

Luke 10:27

Last Saturday, I returned with our Youth from a retreat on the Island of Iona in Scotland. The Scottish Parliament is again talking about trying to leave the United Kingdom. In 1965 the Scottish Folk group the Corries released a newly written song called "O Flower of Scotland." This song quickly became the unofficial national anthem. The song alludes to the battle of Bannockburn. In this battle fought in 1314, the forces of Robert the Bruce defeated the English army of Edward II. This victory assured Scottish independence for 400 years.

The final verse of the song includes these words:

**Those days are passed now
And in the past they must remain
But we can still rise now
And be the nation again
That stood against him
Proud Edward's army
And sent him homeward
Tae think again**

The dream expressed in that song inspires many in Scotland today to ask for another referendum seeking to end political union with England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

In 2014 the people of Scotland rejected a proposal to separate. It was a close vote. Some felt that there are only about 6 million Scots in the larger Britain of over 60 million. How can the larger country know what is best for Scots? The English do not care for Scots and Scots don't really care for the English.

The "no" forces campaigned under the theme of "Better Together." They argued that there were enough common values and shared concerns to hold the United Kingdom together. Each part of Britain has strengths and weaknesses and it was argued together they would be stronger.

I believe that at the heart of the differences between these two positions is different answers to the question, "Who is our neighbor?"

Nearly two thousand years ago, a Jewish lawyer came to Jesus and asked how to gain eternal life. Jesus told him to love God and his neighbor. The man seeking to do what God requires asked a question that resonates even today, "**Who is my neighbor?**"

It is amazing to me how that question continues to be of significance all around the world. Individuals, nations and peoples struggle with that question day after day, "**Who is my neighbor?**"

The collapse of the Soviet Union has allowed ancient grudges and enmities to influence events in Ukraine, the Balkans and other areas where the two sides cannot see each other as neighbors.

In the Middle East, we have witnessed conflict playing out between different branches of Islam. There is terrible violence and oppression perpetrated by Sunni's against Shia's and war waged by Shias against Sunnis. This hostility to each other is rooted in disagreement from 632AD over who should be the successor to Mohammed. The two groups cannot conceive of the other side as being neighbors.

I think we have to admit that in our nation today we are so polarized culturally and politically that people live in isolated communities of like-minded people. We do not even talk to people who have different points of view. Cancel culture seeks to make people who disagree less than human. We treat fellow Americans as disloyal or deplorable.

Who is our neighbor?

Jesus answers this question as he did so many others by telling a story. In the story Jesus told about a Samaritan who stopped to help a Jewish man who had been beaten by robbers and left for dead on the side of the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. There was no reason for the Samaritan to stop and help any Jewish man.

If you recall, at the death of King Solomon in around 931 BC, Israel was split into two parts. The Northern Kingdom was called Israel and the new King Jeroboam set up two new places of worship to replace the temple in Jerusalem. The Southern Kingdom was called Judah and still worshipped at the temple built by Solomon. The Northern Kingdom lasted for about two hundred years until it was defeated by the Assyrians.

The Assyrians took most of the leadership of Israel into exile from which they never returned. Little is known of their future. Thus most of the people left living in the north were uneducated and lacked leadership. They lived under foreign domination and continued to worship a unique form of Judaism. These people were known in Jesus' time as Samaritans, while the Jews traced their lineage to the Southern Kingdom.

Each of these traditions, Jews and Samaritans, believed that they were the true followers of Moses and that the other group were heretics. They grew to despise each other. They had the same kind of religious animosity that was seen in Northern Ireland at the height of the troubles. These two groups avoided contact with each other at all cost. There was no reason for a Samaritan to do anything for a Jew. He would understand a Jew to be an enemy and not a neighbor. This is why Jesus makes the hero of his story a Samaritan in order to shock the Jews who were his audience.

The Samaritan understood the perfect love of God. He knew what Jesus meant when he commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves. He loved this Jew because he understood that each person has absolute value. That is what love of neighbor is all about.

We experience romantic love for our boyfriends, girlfriends or husbands and wives because they have attractive qualities. We love our children in part because we see ourselves in them. We choose our friends because they share some interest or activity that we enjoy.

But the love of neighbor sees the value which exists in each person just because they are. The love of neighbor sees the value even of those who have hurt us or we call enemies. The love of neighbor that Jesus talks about is more than a feeling – it means action. The Good Samaritan did not just notice the injured man on the side of the road. He did not just go over and say, "Too bad, you are a person of value, I feel sorry for you" and then walk away. No, he took the man, bandaged him up and carried him to an inn. He then promised the innkeeper to pay for his care.

The love of neighbor demands action. The love of neighbor is not an emotion or a feeling or an experience. This kind of love means sacrificing to help others. It means when dealing with even an enemy to see them as a neighbor and to want the best for them.

The command to love our neighbor demands that we see the value of every human being and act in their interest.

The love of neighbor is not just some add on to Jesus' teachings. It is not some soft, touchy-feely cliché which is not central to our Christian experience. It is at the very heart of the meaning of the Gospel.

Jesus was asked by the lawyer what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus replied, **"You shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."**

It is not enough to worship God and pledge our love to him. The proof of the reality of our faith is seen in the love of neighbor. It means recognizing the reality of the value of every human person.

In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi talks about an experience he had in his early years as a student in England. During these days he became interested in the Bible. Deeply touched by reading the Gospels, he seriously considered becoming a Christian. Christianity seemed to Gandhi to offer the real solutions to the caste system that divided the people of India. Christianity was a religion that called on people to respect the dignity of all people.

So one Sunday, Gandhi went to a nearby church to attend services. He intended to talk to the minister and ask for instruction in the way of salvation and enlightenment on other doctrines of the faith.

But when he entered the sanctuary, the ushers refused to give him a seat. They suggested that he go and worship with his own people. He left and never came back. He said to himself, **"If Christians have caste differences also; I might as well remain a Hindu!"**

I am sure the ushers in that Church believed they loved God with all their hearts, but in their concrete betrayal of Jesus' command to love their neighbors as themselves; they committed an act of unfaithfulness. When we restrict who we consider to be our neighbor we are unfaithful to the God who loves us.

Is it really possible to love all people as neighbors? Is it possible for human beings to grow in our understanding that others are created in God's image and deserve our concern? Can we begin to overcome our tribalism, and feelings of racism to see people who are different from us as worthy of love? Is it even conceivable on the personal level to seek the best for someone who has hurt us and we consider to be our enemy?

In this life we will not love others perfectly, but we can grow in our love for neighbors. But this is only possible when God dwells in us. We can begin to love others as neighbors because we have experienced being loved perfectly by Christ. For despite all our imperfections and all the things that keep us from being lovable – God loves us still.

The novelist-physician Walker Percy wrote, **"We love those who know the worst about us and don't turn their faces away."** Jesus knew the worst about us and yet believed that we were worth giving his life for. His death on the cross has transformed us from God's enemies to his sons and daughters.

When we receive the perfect love of God into our lives we can begin to love others. But how do we begin to make this happen. I would share three simple suggestions.

First begin with prayer. I believe we begin to grow in love for our neighbors through prayer. All too often our prayers are merely a wish list for our own wants. When we pray we should lift up our concerns on behalf of others. When you pray lift up those groups and people who you are uncomfortable with. Pray that God would take away any remnant of bias from souls. If you feel hostility towards some group, pray for God's blessing on them. The same works on an individual level. Choose this day to begin praying for those people you do not like. Pray for the person who you loathe because they have done something to you. Pray that God will bless them and turn their hearts. If we seek what is best for them in prayer, the bitterness in our hearts will start to melt away and we can begin to learn to love them as neighbors.

Secondly, we can give our time to help others. There are any numbers of ways to serve people in our community. We can give time to the food pantry, Heart and Hands, Meals on Wheels, the Birthday Squad, Gigi's Playhouse and many more. Each of these are examples of practical acts of learning to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Thirdly, we can give of our financial resources. The Good Samaritan gave of his time to stop and help the man beat up on the side of the road. He did even more. When he left him at the inn, he promised that he would pay for his care. So we too can love our neighbors around the world by giving a portion of the goods that we enjoy. Our stewardship helps the church to be at work in every part of the globe. Our offerings are a sign of our love of neighbor.

Is it really possible to overcome ancient barriers?

Eight years ago, the Rev. Ian Paisley passed away at the age of 88. Paisley was the arch-conservative Presbyterian minister in Northern Ireland who fought to keep Northern Ireland in the UK and control of its government in Protestant hands. He was an anti-Catholic's anti-Catholic. When Pope John XXIII died Paisley said, **"This Romish man of sin is now in hell!"** He kept up this harsh rhetoric combined with an unwillingness to compromise for almost 50 years.

Then in 2006 and 2007 Paisley began to open himself to the possibility of seeing Catholics as his neighbors. This led to his agreeing to a power sharing agreement with a party that represented the IRA. He became First Minister of Northern Ireland. At the time he said:

People have come out of a dark tunnel and they can see there is a path out there for us. I think it has put a lot of faith and hope into people.

I believe that Northern Ireland has come to a time of peace, a time when hate will no longer rule. How good it will be to be part of a wonderful healing in our province.

I have sensed a great sigh of relief amongst all our people who want the hostility to be replaced with neighborliness.

Friends, in the story of the Good Samaritan Jesus reminds us this morning that his love has practical, everyday consequences in this world. We are called not only to love God, but to live out that love in the world. You and I must grow in treating each person we encounter in our lives as being of ultimate value worthy to be treated as a neighbor.