

*A Different Definition*

Lessons: Luke 10:25-37, Colossians 1:9-14

Let's begin with a question, like the lawyer did with Jesus that day. We are not really asking Jesus, so much as asking ourselves – and we know that. But we want his answer to tell us what we have to do to be faithful followers, and we also want the answer that does not push us beyond what we are already doing. So, we get brave, take a deep breath, and go ahead and ask our question: “Jesus, we know you are the great teacher. Tell us, what is doing mercy?”

And after reading this account, we hear Jesus' answer: “Doing mercy is doing more than is needed to anyone who is in need.” Let's punch the rewind button and see how we get to Jesus' answer.

“Who is my neighbor?” was a loaded question. To be faithful was to obey Torah. All the laws, right down to the most insane little ones, went back to the Great Law: “Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself.” The Big Ten Commandments had one table for God and one table for Neighbor. All the little laws traced their ancestor tree back to the Big Ten and to the Great Law.

Centuries of holy Torah and Hebrew civil law had tried to define the “neighbor.” The Levites were the “Teaching Elders” of the day. They interpreted the Torah with a fine-tooth comb, and applied it like a pastor when someone needed instruction on doing the right thing. The more the tribes were threatened by enemies coming over the hill and into the valley, the more “neighbor” meant someone in the tribe. When the twelve tribes became a nation, “neighbor” meant “kin” in the national sense. Even when Levites taught the story of Jonah to tell the Hebrews that they needed to announce the one God to the Ninevites, they were saying that the enemy needed to know YHWH. A neighbor was close in one way or another. And an enemy doing you harm was never considered a neighbor.

Jesus was a Jew who saw things differently, and he had a different definition of neighbor. He told a story. A Jew was on the main highway from Jerusalem to Jericho, which everyone knew passed through Samaritan territory. The guy got beat up by Samaritan thugs who liked to pick on Jews who were stupid enough to travel a dangerous road in enemy territory.

The injured Jew was passed up by a Jewish priest, who in obedience to the Torah could not touch a bleeding man. He would lose his ritual cleanness and not be able to perform the sacrifice on the Sabbath. He wanted to help, but had greater obligations. And of course, better that he performed sacrifices at the temple than he himself become a sacrifice in the ditch like this poor fellow.

He was passed up by a Levite, too. The Torah expert knew that even though it was a Jew bleeding in the ditch, he certainly could think a number of justifications for not stopping. There was his family obligation not to put himself at risk, because he was responsible to those who were closer neighbor-kin. There was his duty to his neighbors at the local synagogue to be teacher and instructor. And deep down there was that thing that was deeper than duty. There was his fear that he would wind up in the ditch with the other Jew at the hands of those sorry Samaritans who were never that far away.

Then a Samaritan – the half-blood descendent and racial inferior to the Jew in the ditch – comes down the road, sees the Jew bleeding to death in the ditch, and stops to help.

Jesus tells the story to define the neighbor. So how does this help us with the answer to our question about doing mercy? Well, it helps with the first part about neighbor. Jesus is saying, “Your neighbor is the Samaritan who sees a Jew half-dead in the ditch, and instead of doing what Jews had done to him for centuries, he helps you.”

I don’t think any of us in the room need a bunch of illustrations to explain the modern version of who is really our neighbor. It’s the guy on the West side, the gal from the East side, the illegal doing childcare or yard work, the Middle-East looking person who might just be a terrorist, because you never know. None of these people are “kin” to us. None of them are close to us in much of any way. Surely they don’t live next door like our neighbors.

But that is not really why we are uncomfortable. What makes us uncomfortable in the holy space of worship is that they are all neighbors to God, and we all know all those strange neighbors have a claim on the Great Law – and the Great Ends of the Presbyterian Church – because Jesus treats them like kin and neighbor. They are strangers to us, but they are all neighbors to Christ. And he fulfills the Great Law. He loves us all like neighbors.

What makes us uncomfortable is that Jesus is always turning the coin over to force us to see things from the other side of the way we always like to see them. We are not that far from the lawyer, and his question is our question: How can we use the neighbor rule to limit our responsibility? Just where do we get to stop helping? How wide does the circle have to be? Jesus says drawing circles is the wrong way to look for a neighbor. The neighbor is the guy in front of you who is helping you. We are neighbors when we help the person in front of us who needs help – no matter what labels or excuses we want to make.

The answer to the first question, “Who is my neighbor?” Let’s put it the uncomfortable way: *Your neighbor is the guy you think is a little less human than you are, who sees you in you helpless and stops to help.* And if he stops for us, why won’t we stop to help him?

We are halfway there to a different definition, and we have to remember that our question goes further than neighbor to “What is doing mercy?”

It strikes me that “mercy” is not a word that has real popularity in the church these days. I mean even the Presbyterian part of the church. We hear “grace and peace” a lot. We even have churches named Grace Pres or Peace Pres. But I don’t ever remember hearing about a church named Mercy Presbyterian. I can tell you this much: I searched Google, and there is not a Mercy Presbyterian in the state of Texas. I wonder why?

“Mercy” is one of those words we can use so long as we stay vague about the definition. Mercy just means we go out of our way. We aren’t like the Levite. We were busy, and we got distracted by some need. But we actually stopped what we were doing and did a “mercy thing.” And now they make it easy for us. We are already on our cell phones all the time, and we can text to a number that donates \$10 to the Red Cross that will automatically add it to the phone bill. Mercy is hardly a distraction for a multi-tasker. How convenient can mercy be?

And surely there are times that we are willing to get dirty, unlike the priest. We are past the days when pastors and church members have to stay clean and nice all the time. We feel like we are being merciful when we go out of our way to roll down the window with a dollar for the dirty homeless guy on the street corner. We skip something else we really wanted to do so we could help at church, or do a Habitat day, or some such good thing. But honestly, we don't think that is doing mercy. It is just doing some good.

Let's talk about the extra step we have to take to get to mercy, and why we take steps – but maybe don't quite get to the extra step.

Step One: there is the “help” and “do good” step. We have that covered pretty well, all over the place with all kinds of non-profits that do all kinds of things and someone has labeled good. We have an explosion of organizations that do good, and the wonder is that the world is still pretty much the same in the Samaritan neighborhoods. That leads us to ask about the second step.

Step Two: there is help that is “justice” help. “Justice” is about “giving a person what is due to them.” It is more than a thing about “rights.” It is about meeting real needs. Our culture is big on “equal justice for all,” but what equal justice really means is equals get treated equally in the ways they are supposed to be the same. People on the same level should not get preferential treatment, or should not be left out. The other side of that coin is “unequal justice,” which really means that people that are not equal or the same should be treated differently to help the unequals get to equal.

This is easier to understand that you might think: In Texas we have this saying that people ought to pick themselves up by their own bootstraps. That is a statement of equal justice. It makes the assumption that we are equal – that we all have boots. My father, who grew up in some times when his parents were literally having a hard time getting him boots, would ask the same question every time he heard someone complaining about those lazy people who needed to pick themselves up: “What do you do about the person who doesn't have boots?” That is an example of “unequal justice.” You have to treat the people *without* boots differently, or it is not justice. You have to give people boots, or make sure poor people have a chance at decent education, or maybe even give a baby of a family from the West Side a spot in the NICU next to my grandchildren – like they do out at University Hospital. That is *not* mercy. It is just common sense doing what is just. The sad thing is that the sense of justice is increasingly uncommon in lot of unjust neighborhoods.

So what is mercy? Let's find the definition from the one place we use the word every week in worship. “Lord, have mercy on us sinners.” Oh, now we remember... Mercy is being given what we need, not because we are deserving and not because we beg and not because we make a promise to do better. Mercy is being given more than we need, because the giver can give it *and* the giver gives more than we need. We need the forgiveness and God can forgive, and God forgives even the sins we don't know we have. And God does even more in mercy. God gives us the power to do more than sin some more. God give us the power to live a love that steps the extra step to mercy. God gives us the vision to see what else is needed, and the capacity and courage to do something beside see it.

Mercy is the step beyond the need. Mercy is giving more than what is needed. Mercy is doing the Good Samaritan thing: stopping for the bleeding guy, *and* calling 911, *and* staying

until they get there, *and* answering all the questions, *and* maybe even following them to the hospital, *and* making sure the bill is paid.

Oh wait!! That is more money than I have to give? The ER at University Hospital is more than I can pay? I've shown mercy, but there is a limit. I can't be expected to give 'til it hurts me! Does that mean I am off the hook and I have been faithful without having to pay?

What do you think Jesus thinks? Do we really want to ask him? I imagine Jesus could make us uncomfortable at a hospital named Mercy. I'll just bet he would say that mercy for people who live in the smartest and richest nation on earth might mean that really smart people need to start figuring out how babies from poor neighborhoods can get to doctors more than a huge medical systems can get rich off of poor babies? The Samaritan did not pass by worrying about the political problem of medical care. He saw a person bleeding to death, and realized it was his spiritual problem because he was the one who saw the bleeding. Jesus is not interested in increasing unequal when it is injustice, and Jesus is still judging Levites and Pharisees and lawyers and yes, even preachers, and anyone else who can't see that the West Side is *his* neighborhood, and those poor babies are *his* babies.

You see how quickly Jesus turns the coin over and turns the world right side up? Sure, these are really complicated issues that we can never solve – as long as we are asking the wrong questions. Christians can't solve these justice problems alone, but we can keep asking the mercy questions until people turn the coin over and hear the problem as a spiritual one. Sure, these are really impossible problems in our time that we will never solve – as long as we are unwilling to do what a sorry Samaritan did – pay the bill for a Jew in the ditch. Mercy is expensive, and mercy isn't mercy unless it costs *us* something. After all, look what the gift of mercy cost God to give us forgiveness. Our gratitude to a faithful Savior who went way past the mercy step is to give as good as we have gotten from the one we call Lord.

At the beginning we said, "Doing mercy is doing more than is needed to anyone who is in need." The real neighbor shows mercy by paying the bill. Now, we are ready to face the different definition of doing mercy: *Doing mercy is doing more than is needed for the sorry little-less-than-human guy who is helpless and dying in the ditch, because we who have been sorry and little-less-than-human received mercy from the only guy who would stop to help any helpless person who cried out to him.*

I don't have all the answers, but I know I have to live with what I know. I know Christ told me I am supposed to love others the way he loves me. What I know is that Christ showed mercy to me. I'm not going to keep asking for mercy every week unless I do a better job of giving the mercy I have received. After all, Jesus said that I would know blessing when I am merciful to others, because I will receive even more mercy to give.