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Providence Presbyterian Church
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Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Luke 10:25-37

"Won't You Be My Neighbor"

How many of you remember Mr. Roger's Neighborhood? Fred Rogers was a Presbyterian minister who spent years teaching children and adults about being neighbors to one another. I'll bet we can sing the opening song of Mr Rogers Neighborhood:

"It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood
A beautiful day for a neighbor
Would you be mine?
Could you be mine?"

Mr. Rogers Followed Jesus' teaching about who is our neighbor. It's a lesson that we need even more today as our neighbors are under suspicion. Jesus clearly taught that our neighbor is not determined by geography but by theology. Because we believe that God's love is unconditional, we are called to emulate that love with one another.

The parable of the Good Samaritan lays the groundwork for understanding our responsibility towards our neighbor by setting up an encounter between two people who in other circumstances would consider themselves enemies or at least not neighbors. Before we get to the parable, we need to understand a few things about the context of Jesus' teaching. Isn't it irritating when someone tells a story or a joke you don't understand because you don't understand the context? It's the same with the Bible. We need to understand the context of the stories Jesus tells in order to better understand their meaning.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all combine a passage from Deuteronomy with a passage from Leviticus. In Matthew and Mark Jesus combines the passages and Luke has a lawyer combine the passages, with Jesus agreeing to his assessment of what is the greatest commandment. Another thing that's interesting is that all three add a word that is missing in the Old Testament text from Deuteronomy - "mind" In Matthew, Jesus says, "heart, soul and mind." In Mark Jesus says, "heart soul mind and strength." In Luke, the learned lawyer says, "heart soul strength and mind," with which Jesus agrees.

So, what does this new element, “mind” add to our understanding of the great commandment? One thing it does for me is reinforce why I particularly like being Presbyterian - we Presbyterians are not threatened by the use of intellect. We may, at times, overdo it, but we do expect our members and leaders to use their minds and abilities for the Kingdom of God.

Faith and discipleship is not just about what we feel, the spirit of enthusiasm we seek, or the strength of character we exhibit. Faith is also a matter of reason. It suits me just fine that Jesus approved the addition of “mind” to the greatest commandment. It also suits me just fine that Jesus paired Deuteronomy and Leviticus in a way unheard before.

The second commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. Another way of saying this might be “respect your neighbor as you respect yourself,” or “Assume that your neighbor is more like you than not.” The Bible is full of examples of how we are to treat our neighbor as fairly and as we want to be treated. All of which sounds really nice in theory, but when it comes right down to it, it’s hard to be fair to some neighbors.

The Administration is sinking a lot of dollars and effort into incarcerating undocumented aliens who live among us as our neighbors. As far as scripture is concerned, it really doesn’t matter why someone is our neighbor or how they got here. What matters is how we treat them. While our country is not bound to follow God’s commands, as followers of Jesus, we are bound to love our neighbors and advocate for their fair treatment. Masked officials, detention camps and deportations without due process are the antithesis of fair treatment of our neighbors.

Our responsibility as disciples of Jesus Christ is clear - we are to treat everyone around us with respect, no matter their status. St. Paul tells the Galatians “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Paul advocated for the elimination of division between God’s children, and yet we live in an era where divide and conquer is the mantra of those in power. As followers of Christ, our mantra is to unite and serve.

That provides some of the context for understanding this parable of the Good Samaritan – everyone is our neighbor who deserves to be treated as a child of God. Now, we’re ready to dive into the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Oh, wait a minute. First, we need to talk about the Samaritan

Samaritans were thought to be descended from two tribes in Northern Israel and claimed an identity separate from the Jews in exile in the 6th century BC. Samaritans claimed to be the true descendants of the early Israelites and focused on Mt. Gerazim

instead of Jerusalem. Both the Samaritans and the Jews taught that the “other” should be avoided at all costs. The fact that Jesus interacted frequently with Samaritans was very revealing of his perspective about this ancient prejudice.

So, an expert in the Jewish law tested Jesus with the following question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” In typical Jesus style, he turns the question around on the questioner and asks: “What is written in the law?” The expert says: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” “Do this,” Jesus said and you will live.”

But the expert wanted to “justify” himself, so he pushed Jesus with the question, “And who is my neighbor?” When scripture says that the expert wanted to justify himself, it means that he wanted to engineer his own salvation. The expert thought he could do it on his own. Scripture tells us that we are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Our justification is accomplished only by the grace of God and our faithful response to that grace.

Instead of directly answering the expert’s questions, Jesus tells a story. He said, a man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho, along what was known to be a treacherous stretch of road. He was attacked by robbers who stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away leaving him half dead. Then three different people came across the man: a priest, a respected religious man and a reviled Samaritan. The “holy men” passed on by. Only the much-despised Samaritan stopped to help. Not only did he help but he literally went the extra mile of taking him to an inn, where he paid for the man’s care until he had recovered.

Then Jesus asked the expert, “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” Whereas the expert had asked Jesus who is my neighbor, Jesus turned the question around and asked “who acted like a neighbor?” In other words, Jesus said that the critical question is not “who is my neighbor?” but “Am I being a good neighbor?”

The biblical demand for being a good neighbor doesn’t depend on the other person; it depends on us. So, whether we are thinking of our physical neighbors, or immigrants or those with whom we disagree, the burden is on us to be a good neighbor. The fact that the person in the parable who was being the good neighbor was a Samaritan, who was rejected by Jewish society made the impact even more powerful.

The facts and implication of the parable seem pretty straightforward if we examine it only as a fictional story. But what if the story is not so fictional? What if the story is also

descriptive of a man named Jesus, who was an immigrant as a child, who walked many roads, was robbed of dignity, stripped of his clothes, beaten and left not just half dead but all the way dead? What if the parable compels us to examine how we have treated Jesus? Have we been too busy to invite Jesus into our lives? Have we been too self-concerned to care about how the world treats Jesus and disregards him? Have we failed to see Jesus in another person in need and passed on by? Have we defined our neighbor so narrowly that we are ignoring Jesus in other cultures and other lands?

Opportunities to be a good neighbor abound. Everywhere we go, there is an opportunity to be a good neighbor. We have practiced being a good neighbor to our nearest neighbors – Primrose School and the other tenants and owners of this building. Primrose told us in advance that they would be working on their parking lot this weekend and we gave them permission to park their buses behind our building. We host Lifeline screening every other month as a service to our neighbors in the community. We partner with our neighbors in Tamil Church to provide ministry to our neighbors from South Asia.

This week we've witnessed good neighborliness on an international scale when Mexican Nationals came across our southern border to assist in the search and rescue operation in Texas after the horrendous flood. They did this despite the awful characterizations some have made about Mexicans. That was a tremendous act of neighborliness that we would do well to emulate.

In the coming days, weeks and months, I'd like us to find more ways to be good neighbors both near and far. Together we can be a witness to God's love for everyone, regardless of their status, standing or station in life. If you think of or spot an opportunity for Providence to be a good neighbor, please suggest it to me or one of our Elders. As we learn from the parable of the Good Samaritan, the question is not "who is our neighbor?" but "to whom shall we be good neighbors?"

It is almost as if Jesus himself sings this song to us:

"So let's make the most of this beautiful day,
 Since we're together, we might as well say,
 Would you be mine?
 Could you be mine?
 Won't you be my neighbor?
 Won't you please,
 Won't you please,
 Please won't you be my neighbor?"

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen