

## THE POWER OF A HELPING HAND

Luke 10:25-37

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Jokes about lawyers are about as plentiful as puns about preachers. With apologies to my lawyer friends, I want to tell you two or three of my favorite lawyer jokes:

When lawyers die, why are they buried 600 feet underground? Because deep down they are really nice people. What's the difference between a good lawyer and a great lawyer? A good lawyer knows the law; a great lawyer knows the judge. What do you get when you cross a librarian with a lawyer? All the information you need but you can't understand a word of it.

What's the problem with lawyer jokes? Lawyers don't think they are very funny and no one else thinks they are jokes.

In our scripture lesson today, Jesus finds himself in a public debate with an expert lawyer. The lawyer raises the question of eternal life. Jesus replies, "Didn't you learn that in law school?" Catch the banter here. And the lawyer, wanting to justify himself, comes on with a more complicated question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus lifts the question out of the atmosphere of controversy and sits it down on a dangerous road in Palestine. Such is the setting for the famous story of the Good Samaritan.

### **WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR? THE ROBBERS SAY NO ONE.**

Verse 30 — *A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers who stripped him, beat him, and went away leaving him half dead.* The 17 miles from Jerusalem to Jericho was known as a bloody pass. The narrow road descended through crevices and caves that made it a haven for

robbers and thieves. Smart people never traveled this road alone. But this man, whose name is unknown and nationality not cited, tries to make it on his own. There he encounters the grabbers of life who live by the rule of “do it to others before they do it to you.”

That ethic is still with us. It’s why we lock our doors and protect our property. On New Year’s Day 2002, passers-by robbed the body of a Las Vegas woman killed after she was hit by three vehicles. They combed through her purse, wallet, and backpack taking anything of value they could find.

One of the big problems of disaster recovery is looting. Immediately after a hurricane or tornado, the looters come in right behind and start picking up all the spoils they can find and take it for themselves. “What’s yours is mine and I’ll take it.” People live by that ethic. That’s the neighborliness of the robbers in this story.

Let me bring this story a little closer home. Do you ever feel the need for greed? Students at the University of North Carolina doing DNA research on fish in local supermarkets discovered owners were taking inferior fish like sheepshead and porgies and selling them as much more expensive red snapper. They were marking up the prices by packaging them well. Do you ever feel the need for greed?

In the movie Wall Street, Gordon Gekko is a business tycoon bent on success at any price. During his takeover bid at a paper company’s stockholder meeting, he lays out his perspective. “The point Ladies and Gentlemen is that greed is good, greed is right, greed works.” Do you ever feel the need for greed?

Let me bring it a little closer home. What about the sweat shops in China, Indonesia, and Central America known for their use of child labor to produce products at reduced cost that we rush to purchase in America. Here’s the point. Even if you win in the rat race, you are still a rat.

Who is my neighbor? There are those who respond to that, nobody is my neighbor. It's that kind of world. You've got to take care of yourself and if you don't take care of yourself nobody is going to watch after you. So you better look out for number one.

**WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR? THE RELIGIOUS REPLY, SELECTIVE ONES**, or certain ones, or it all depends, you have to be careful these days. You can't trust everybody anymore; you've got to be selective.

Verses 31-32 — *Now by chance, a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.*

By birth and by calling, you would assume that someone paid to be righteous would stop to render assistance. Did hope rise and despair follow when the broken man watched the priest pass by, or somehow was he not surprised?

If a priest touched a dead man, he was dead meat for service in the temple. He would have to go through all kinds of ritual cleansing to be reinstated. Was this unnamed, unknown nobody worth that kind of effort? The priest decides not.

The Levite was a doorkeeper in the House of God, a member of the hereditary order from which was chosen the singers in the temple. He was either an usher or a choir member. Sometimes hearers of the word become doers of the word more consistently than proclaimers of the word. If the preacher won't do it, surely a thoughtful lay person will. Instead the Levite passes by on the other side.

The parable is an indictment on religion, especially practitioners of the faith. Do the righteous care? Certainly so, sometimes; when it's convenient, of course. If it's a matter of taking care of our own, always. The longer I live the more I see people slipping through the cracks of my concern and a parable like this shocks me to reality.

As Reverend Gordon McDonald tells the story, he had flown into Minneapolis and caught a cab headed to the Minneapolis Convention Center where he was to give a speech to a group of Christians there. The cab had stopped at a red light when a homeless man trying to get across the street fell and landed on his chin. “There was blood all over the place and I got out of the cab and looked over the top of the door at the man less than 6 feet away,” says Gordon. “Then I started thinking: I’ve got on a brand new suit that will get messed up. I have to give a speech in 15 minutes. I’m in a strange city; I don’t know where to get help. I don’t have any medical training. I could get sued.

“Before I could come to my better senses, other people came to this man’s aid, picked him up and carried him out of the street and I went on to make a speech about sensitivity and caring for the needs of other human beings. I thought when I finished my talk, how hypocritical can you be?”

A religion that passes by on the other side is really no religion at all.

Who is my neighbor? A robber says nobody, what’s yours is mine and I’ll take it. The religious people say some people, selective ones. What’s mine is mine and I’ll keep it. But a Samaritan comes by.

**WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR? THE SAMARITAN REPLIES, THE ONE IN NEED.**

*Verses 33-35 — But a Samaritan while traveling came near him, and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denari, gave them to the innkeeper and said, take care of him and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.*

Maybe you know from Sunday school or being in church a long time that Jews

have no dealings with Samaritans. The bitter strife had been around for centuries. So for Jesus to make a Samaritan the hero of this story is like a knock out punch in the third round of a title fight. His hearers had to be stunned, shocked, stumped. But the message is powerfully clear.

Need has no boundaries of race, region, religion, or relationship. You don't throw a life away just because it's been banged up a bit. It's not those who talk the talk but those who walk the walk that make a difference in the hour of need.

The Samaritan picked him up, put him up, and paid him up. He had eyes to see, a heart to care and gifts to share. Exactly what part of being a neighbor don't we understand?

I ran into a little piece when I was working on this sermon that I had never found before. It's called "Always."

*People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered, but love them anyway. If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish ulterior motives, but be kind anyway. The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow, but be good anyway. Honesty and frankness will make you vulnerable, but be honest and frank anyway. What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight, but build anyway. People need help but may attack you if you try to help them, help them anyway. In the final analysis, it's between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.*

Need is our neighbor says Jesus and wherever there is need we need to respond. What's yours is mine and I'll share says the Samaritan.

### **WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR, WHAT SAY YOU?**

Verse 36 — *Jesus said, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The lawyer said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said, "Go and do likewise."*

I need to ask you a couple questions as I asked myself a couple questions. Where is the need? Is a family member hurting, or a friend feeling crushed? Is a child being picked on or a teen being abandoned? Is a co-worker confused, or an acquaintance being abused? Are the homeless ignored or the prisoners forgotten? Are the lost forsaken, and the hungry left alone?

Need is our neighbor. Sometimes the need is open and obvious like a running sore. Other times need is hidden and covered like a covert cancer. If the parable is right, we need not go out of our way to encounter neediness. We need only to open our eyes and motivate our wills. Where is the need?

But the more important question is this. What are we going to do about it? Am I willing to hear the cry of the needy? Am I willing to use my gifts in ministry? Dare I become a Stephen Minister or Andrew Minister? Could I sing in a choir or lead a small group? Dare I start a new ministry that meets the needs of others?

How can I use what God has given me to answer the need of the world? There are people who are doing that. One person who is doing that in this congregation is Marcus Stamps. I want you to meet Marcus this morning.

Marcus is one of our singles in this congregation. He has been very active in leading Sunday school and all of these kinds of things but he picked up a new ministry a few years ago that I want him to tell you about today. Marcus, I remember sitting in my office several years ago and you were praying and I was praying with you trying to discern what God was calling you to do in this community to act out your faith. You discovered it in prison ministry and you are leading us there in the Men's Prison here in the city. Will you tell us how that came about?

Marcus: Several years ago, after several meetings with Dr. Olds and going through the Ministry Discovery Workshop, I was looking for an avenue to provide some gifts, looking to do more in this world. Through an odd occurrence I was

forwarded an e-mail that was seeking volunteers to lead a Disciple Bible Study at the prison. As soon as I saw that e-mail I knew in my heart that was where I needed to be. From that moment on it has been an incredible experience. We have been leading Disciple Bible Study at the prison the past three years and we are doing Chapel services now.

Dr. Olds: Great! Read your e-mails. God may be talking. Sleep through my sermons, but read your e-mail, because God may be calling. Marcus, will you tell me what meaning this has had for the inmates and for you. You go there every week and have been doing it for years now.

Marcus: The inmates have an opportunity to take a look at the Bible, to learn it, to discuss differences of opinions that they have and to learn to share their differences and have a fellowship. They have people come in that care about them. They have an opportunity to receive love and forgiveness and have an opportunity to share the joy of God and knowing him, of knowing Jesus Christ and knowing what Jesus has done for them. So for the inmates it is an incredible experience to get in there and fellowship with God. And for me, it's been an incredible experience that gives me an opportunity to be in a very genuine, very real, and open and honest Christian fellowship where my spirituality and my faith grows and collectively both the inmates and I continue to have hope and reason to believe. For the inmates they get an opportunity to see good things in their world that for the most part has been broken down.

Dr. Olds: Marcus, thank you for leading this congregation in this ministry. I know it's growing, expanding. You are doing a Chapel service now on Thursdays as well as the Disciple Bible Study and there are other people involved. Thank you for hearing the voice of God and responding to God.

If I can help somebody as I travel along,  
If I can cheer somebody with a word or a song,  
If I can keep somebody from traveling wrong,

Then my living will not be in vain.

Have you discovered the power of a helping hand?

Amen.

















