

“There Goes The Neighborhood”

Luke 10:25-37



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One day in El Paso at the church we were having a conversation about what God would say to us when we went to heaven. One member said, “I hope he will say, “Come on in. You’re mansion is right around the corner.” Another said the biblical quote, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.” Still another said, “He will say, ‘Buenos dias!’” Any doubt where the third was from? It was my associate pastor who was born and raised in Monterey, Mexico. None of us imagines God or the proverbial “St. Pete” speaking to us at the pearly gates in a language other than our own. Some of us picture what God looks like, maybe like our grandfather. It’s amazing how most cultures have a Jesus that looks like them: African black Jesus, Oriental Jesus, Latin American Jesus. Why can’t the world figure out that Jesus looked like a white European? Ha! We tend to fashion God in our image.

I had a friend, Pablo Nester, an executive with Mobil oil turned preacher, who said, “God is like me.” One of the female preachers then said, “What if I was to say, ‘God is like me?’” The truth is that both of them are created in God’s image (they reflect God’s love, creativity, desire for justice, etc), but God is not created in either of their images. Creating God in our image is something we all do and the Bible calls it “sin.”

Not only that, people who tend to think of God or Jesus as being like them tend to think the body of Christ is like them, choosing to associate most of the time with those who are like them. And in no place does “birds of a feather flock together” apply than the American Protestant Church (including the vast majority of United Methodist congregations). The most segregated hour of the week is still 11:00 on Sunday morning. Churches in Lubbock are even higher than the national average in that regard. What that means is that in the majority of our waking hours we are with people like us and our sense of true community is severely limited, affecting every arena of our lives. The cost is deprivation of everyone concerned and unnecessary conflict and crime that cost us more than we would ever dream. As that is the case, we deny our own God-createdness in its variety and beauty, and the bible calls that “sin.”

It is to people caught in their idolatry (fashioning God in their image) and limited community (learning to love people who are, for the most part, just like us) that Jesus tells the famous story of “The Good Samaritan.” It is one of the most well-known and misunderstood stories of Jesus. And on this day when we’re thinking about reaching people, Jesus’ great parable may tell us we have messed it up.

You know the story. It reads like a melodrama. It happens on the Jericho road with high ridges on each side and vulnerability at corners. People were often attacked on the Jericho road. The people hearing Jesus would nod their heads in understanding that a crime would be committed there. The bible says the unsuspecting traveler “fell among thieves.” They sneak from behind a rock, jump him from behind, take everything he has and beat him within an inch of his life, leaving him for dead. The man is lying there. The first to come by on the road is a priest. He’s the man the people go to when they want to be declared clean and healed. But he is also not allowed to touch animals or people that are dead. This victim is just about dead and why should he take his own life in his hands. As the man goes to the other side of the road so he won’t have to deal with the man or the dilemma he represents. Not only is church the most segregated institution, it also is often one of the most isolated. We represent safety from the world’s ills.

Perhaps that's why some people call this place we worship in a sanctuary, a refuge. But it was never meant to separate us from our hurting world. If your job is to pronounce people clean and healed, then you have to deal with people who were at least at one time unclean and sick. A sanctuary is a place where hurting and sick people can find refuge, not a place where well people can hide out. The priest went by on the other side. Boo! Hiss!

The next one to come by was a Levite, the tribe set aside for leading worship, the symbol of all religious lay people. He, too, takes a wide berth around the dying man. He may make him late for the service or keep him from meeting other Levites. Besides, it's just not smart. When I read about the Levite, I think of Romans 12 in which we are told to "offer our bodies as a living sacrifice...which is our reasonable worship." Worship is not just singing hymns and going to worship services. It is about living a life of worship in which we offer who we are to the glory of God and for the benefit of the hurting, broken and poverty-stricken around us. The Levite went by on the other side. Boo! Hiss!

Now the story slows down. The music in the background turns ominous. The next man is a Samaritan, a half-breed, the one devout Jews thanked God daily they weren't one. He comes from the wrong side of town where crime is awful. Reputation is that many of the thieves on the Jericho road were Samaritans. You already can predict where Jesus is going. He's going to say that since the priest and the Levite didn't do what they should have done, the Samaritan finished the job and killed the guy. The Samaritan bends over the guy. Will he do the deed with a knife or large rock? Our prediction is wrong. The man takes from his pouch some ointment and binds his wounds. He then helps him to a place where he can be cared for and pays for his care and lodging. The one that was feared and mistrusted, the one who was hated and rejected, is the one who shows compassion on the man.

Remember this story is told in response to a lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor?" And the lawyer's question was following Jesus' quote, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." What the lawyer was really asking is "Who is this one we are supposed to love as ourselves?" In our language we might ask "Who is the one we're supposed to reach?" "Are we willing to reach Samaritans?" But then the story would have been told differently. The Samaritan would have been the one beaten and left for dead. Then after the self-righteous religious leaders went by on the other side, a common Jewish layperson would come and do the compassionate thing. That's not what happens, because this is not the intent of the story. The question in the story is not "Who are we going to reach?" but rather "Who are we going to let reach us?" What if the young lawyer was incomplete because he had not included Samaritans in his network of those he loved and more importantly, allowed to love him?

We were talking about this among the staff and Nathan Timmons said, "Often the church sees itself as this island surrounded by a moat and we think of what we have to do to 'go out and reach those people.' The truth is we're all bumper to bumper, and our purpose is to open up and allow ourselves to be in relationship with each other with both sides having something to offer." But here is the risk in that. If you allow the Samaritan, the one that is outside your normal network to reach you, you won't stay the way you are. It will change you. For three summers, I worked with inner city youth in a summer camp. I didn't even like children and youth when I went to work there. But it was a job. I taught them about Christ, taught them about different games and skills, and kept them from killing each other. But they taught me how to love and care for kids. The power of relationship was not built on me reaching them, but on me allowing them to reach me. In El Paso, we decided to teach a course entitled, Conversational Spanish for Ministry, so that we could reach out better to the Hispanic community. What that did was allow our Hispanics in the church to offer us training in language and culture and together we found that each had something to offer. And for us the idea of neighbor broadened and deepened. In every church I have served, I have gone to serve and reach them and the power of relationship has always happened when I allowed the people in those churches to serve and reach me.

In this campaign, we are seeking to fund our first unit from which we hope to reach people that we haven't reached yet for Jesus Christ. That is a noble motivation and it is part of God's Vision and Our Mission. But the secret to doing that reaching is not going out there as those who have reaching out to those who have not, as those who have it together reaching out to those who don't. The secret to reaching them is going there to open up in relationship so that people can reach us and make us more than we ever dreamed we could be and be part of us making a difference in Lubbock, Texas that could never happen otherwise. The neighborhood changes because we have broadened and deepened what it means to be a neighbor. At the Memphis campus our neighborhood is changing. We are diversifying ethnically and culturally. College students are moving in all around us. And some are thinking, "There goes the neighborhood." But the truth is that God is always looking to change our neighborhood, breaking down the barriers of who can associate together, work together, and even worship together. God is not a WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant). He's bigger than that. And he has created the church and his world to be more than that. So he invites us to broaden who we will call neighbor, those whom we will love as we love ourselves. Then God says, "Hey, they look more like me. They look more like my kids. They really are carrying out my dream of reaching out to each other and letting themselves be reached. They are making my world what I've always wanted it to be. Well done, good and faithful servants. You got it. The greatness of life is being compassionate to those around you and allowing them to be compassionate to you. Then my always changing church becomes part of an always changing neighborhood who bless each other and free me to bless them all."