

Looking Around: Being A Good Neighbor.ⁱ

Luke 10:25-37

This message is adapted from “Looking Around: Being A Good Neighbor” in *Gaining A Fresh Perspective: Seeing Relationships through New Eyes* by Charles R. Swindoll, Insight for Living, 2002

Sometimes we need to get back to the basics. I’ve heard the legendary Green Bay Packer coach Vince Lombardi would begin training camp each year by walking up to the front of the room with a football in his hand and say to the players gathered, “Gentlemen, this is a football.” In those five words, Lombardi communicated his point: We’re going to start with the basics and make sure we’re executing all the fundamentals.

Now, saying that to a bunch of professional players is kind of like picking up a book and telling a librarian, “Hey, this is a book.” But rather than think of it as an insult, it is meant to be a reminder to us we need to start with the basics and build on them. This is also true about our Christian faith and that is what today’s gospel reading is all about.

In Luke 10, our “Head Coach” is bringing us back to the basics by announcing: “Christian, this is what it means to be a true neighbor!”

It began as a test – an expert in the Jewish law asked Jesus, “*Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” (v. 25)

Turning the tables on the man, Jesus answered with another question: “*What is written in the Law? How do you read it?*” (v. 26)

William Barclay in his study on the Gospel of Luke points out the subtlety in Jesus’ response that we might miss because we aren’t familiar with the customⁱⁱ. Strict orthodox Jews wore around their wrists little leather boxes called phylacteries, which contained key passages of scripture such as the Shema:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all you heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give

you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

This was a key teaching of what it meant to be a child of God. It was recited daily in both morning and evening prayer and a reminder of the basic instruction to love God and love neighbor. So what Jesus was doing was saying to this man just look at your own wrist and it will answer the question.

Dutifully, the man quoted the Scripture he knew by heart. Jesus congratulated him for giving the right answer, but He also challenged him to go beyond Scripture memory and start putting his knowledge into action: *“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”* (v.28)

Essentially, Jesus told the lawyer, “You have the right idea, So do something about it!” As far as Jesus was concerned, the case was closed.

The man, however, didn’t care for the incriminating verdict. Reluctant to leave the scene, he shifted the argument back to Jesus and tried to get off the hook by quibbling over the meaning of a word: *“Ah, but who is my neighbor?”* (v. 29 The Voice)

Some rabbis of the day, according to Barclay, limited the word neighbor to mean only their fellow Jews. But Jesus sidestepped this issue by telling a story that would explain his meaning beyond a doubt:

“This fellow was traveling down from Jerusalem to Jericho when some robbers mugged him. They took his clothes, beat him to a pulp, and left him naked and bleeding and in critical condition.” (Luke 10:30 The Voice)

The story is about a man in need - a man who had taken a treacherous journey from Jerusalem to Jericho, where the way was rocky and steep and the altitude dropped thirty-six hundred feet

over a distance of twenty miles. Robbers loved that lonely stretch of road. They could mug and murder travelers there without fear of intervention. Called “The Bloody Way,” it was a threatening and dangerous road for a person traveling alone.”

As Jesus continued, the drama heightened. He introduced two religious men into His story, drawing the pious lawyer into a net of emotional identification: *“By chance, a priest was going down that same road, and when he saw the wounded man, he crossed over to the other side and passed by. Then a Levite who was on his way to assist in the temple also came and saw the victim lying there, and he too kept his distance.”* (v. 31-32 The Voice)

These two men deliberately avoided the bleeding man lying crumpled in the dirt. The first a priest of Jerusalem’s temple, a man whose life was consecrated to the things of God. The second, a Levite, was an assistant to the first. Both men, religious professionals, saw the man but ignored the need.

James, the half-brother of Jesus, had something to say about this kind of heartless religion - *“It’s useless!”*

“It would be like seeing a brother or sister without any clothes out in the cold and begging for food, and saying, “Shalom, friend, you should get inside where it’s warm and eat something,” but doing nothing about his needs— leaving him cold and alone on the street. What good would your words alone do? The same is true with faith. Without actions, faith is useless. By itself, it’s as good as dead. “(James 2:15-17)

And, according to John, if we truly love God, we’ll open our hearts and show love toward others also:

We know what true love looks like because of Jesus. He gave His life for us, and He calls us to give our lives for our brothers and sisters. If a person owns the kinds of things we need to make it in the world but refuses to share with those in need, is it even possible that God’s love lives in him? My little children, don’t just talk about love as an

idea or a theory. Make it your true way of life, and live in the pattern of gracious love. (1 John 3:16-18)

In Jesus story, he continues with a third traveler. In contrast to the two religious men who pass on by, the third man stopped and demonstrated compassion.

“Then a despised Samaritan journeyed by. When he saw the fellow, he felt compassion for him. The Samaritan went over to him, stopped the bleeding, applied some first aid, and put the poor fellow on his donkey. He brought the man to an inn and cared for him through the night. The next day, the Samaritan took out some money—two days’ wages to be exact—and paid the innkeeper, saying, “Please take care of this fellow, and if this isn’t enough, I’ll repay you next time I pass through.” (Luke 10:33-35 The Voice)

Most of us have heard a reference to being a Good Samaritan, and the importance of helping others but I’m afraid we might miss the powerful punch of what’s happening here.

At the Winter Theological Event on Sunday, this was our opening Bible study and one person suggested – imagine Trump as the one asking the question and Jesus telling him the one to stop and help was a radical Islamic terrorist or a Syrian refugee, and you might start to get a sense of the radical nature of Jesus’ story.

“There was a deep hatred between Jews and Samaritans. The Jews saw themselves as pure descendants of Abraham, while the Samaritans were a mixed race produced when Jews from the northern kingdom intermarried with other people after Israel’s exile.”ⁱⁱⁱ The full-blooded Jews despised them and criticized their beliefs and faith practices.

Yet, it was a Samaritan who proved to be the most worthy neighbor. The Samaritan saw the man lying beside the road in agony, and his heart stirred within him so that he couldn’t pass by without helping. That’s the way compassion affects us. It stirs us; it troubles us; it keeps us awake at night until we do something.

Did you notice the lengths to which the Samaritan went to show love to the man? He went to the man. He provided first aid treatment for his wounds. He put the man on his donkey and took him to an inn. He took care of him through the night and when he had to leave, he paid for at least three weeks' worth of lodging and food to ensure the man's full recovery.

Unlike Jerusalem's religious elite, the Samaritan went the extra mile for this man in need. **He** was a good neighbor - which brought Jesus to the point of His story.

Narrowing his message to a single question, shot like an arrow straight through the lawyer's heart, Jesus asked: "*Which of these three proved himself a neighbor to the man who had been mugged by the robbers?*" The lawyer replied, "*The one who showed mercy to him.*" (Notice, he isn't even willing to state the Samaritan in his answer, the hatred ran so deep.) Then Jesus said, "*Well then, go and do the same.*" (Luke 10:36-37)

The parable defies any rebuttal from the lawyer. Jesus skillfully shifted from the original question, "Who is my neighbor?" To the more important question, "What kind of neighbor am I?"

Like the lawyer, we tend to want to place the burden of responsibility on someone else's shoulders. Our degree of mercy often depends on whether people fit our description of a "worthy neighbor." But Jesus places the burden of compassion on us. Are we really people who love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength? Do we truly love our neighbors as ourselves? Can we prove it by our actions?"

Christianity doesn't get more basic than this! A caring, compassionate heart is absolutely essential to the message we have to share with the world. It is God's deep love and Christ's sacrifice for us that we should model for others in our lives. Our neighbors won't understand Christ's love until they see it demonstrated by our outstretched hands.

Let's go and be Good Neighbors.

ⁱ Swindoll, Charles R. *Looking Around: Being A Good Neighbor*” in *Gaining A Fresh Perspective: Seeing Relationships through New Eyes* by Charles R. Swindoll, *Insight for Living*, 2002. Pages 70-74

ⁱⁱ Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Luke*, rev. ed., The Daily Study Bible Series, Westminster Press, 1975. pg. 140.

ⁱⁱⁱ note on Luke 10:33, *Life Application Study Bible, New Living Translation*. Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. 2004