Sermon 08-04-19

Luke 10: 25-37

The Art of Neighboring: *What If Jesus Really Meant What He Said?*

Working with kids and teens can be a challenge, yet it can also be fun. It can definitely be educational, and it can also be very enlightening.

Melinda and I had the privilege to teach 20 of our young people, which included two from the UCC church, over 36 weeks in Confirmation class. **GRAPHIC: CONFIRMATION CLASS.** This was the first confirmation class in a couple years and from what others have said, the largest class they can remember.

Being together for 36 weeks gave us the opportunity to spend a lot of time with our confirmands growing together in faith and in the image of Christ. It was interesting to watch them interact with the lessons and to see how much they knew. For example, when asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” they would answer, “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 your neighbor as yourself.

Now, we probably all know the follow up to that question. It was, “Who is your neighbor?”

They would quickly reply, “Everybody!” They didn’t have any hesitation. They were confident that we ought to consider everybody our neighbor!

What would you say if I were to ask you the same question? Who are your neighbors? Who are you called to love? More importantly, who aren’t you? This question, “Who is my neighbor?” Is actually a very important question. It’s one that comes up in a couple different places in Scripture, but the most notable place it appears is in Luke 10.

In Luke 10, Jesus is meeting with an attorney, a young man who’s an expert in the law of Moses. This young man would have been a religious leader, a faithful and devout Jew, and it doesn’t take long to realize he had an axe to grind. He has some questions for Jesus and most scholars suggest that his questions were loaded. He was trying to expose Jesus, trap Jesus, or at least gain an advantage over Jesus. The attorney doesn’t ask Jesus about the Greatest Commandment (that’s what you’d find in other gospel account), instead he asks Jesus about matters of eternal life. This is what we read:

**GRAPHICS: Just then a lawyer stood up *to test* Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ (LUKE 10:25)**

The attorney was testing or questioning Jesus’ authority, but Jesus upon hearing the attorney’s question and his tone, didn’t back down. In fact, he stayed the course. He knew that any expert in the law would already know the answer to that question, so instead of answering the question, Jesus asks one of his 307 questions we find in the Gospels and puts it back in the attorney’s lap: **GRAPHICS: 26Jesus said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ (LUKE 10:26)**

The attorney couldn’t help himself, he was an expert, an answer man, so he quickly responded saying exactly what was written in the law, word for word. **GRAPHICS: 27He answered, ‘You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.’ (Luke 10:27)**

Jesus affirmed the man’s knowledge. You have given the right answer. I am in total agreement with you. However, Jesus doesn’t stop there. He continues on. Jesus doesn’t continue by saying, “Congratulations, you’ve given the right answer, now tell him what he’s won.” He doesn’t say, “Congratulations, and it’s official you are now the best student in the class and the smartest in the land.” Instead, he agrees with the man and pushes right past his correct answer and urges the attorney to act. He says, **GRAPHICS: Do this, and you will live.**

In saying this, Jesus reminds us that the means by which we inherit eternal life doesn’t come by way of right answers. The life that really is life comes by way of having the courage to live our beliefs, to live out our convictions. *There is so much more to a life of faith than simply having the right answers*.

The attorney didn’t know how to respond, to Jesus’ command to “Go. Do.” So, like the attorney he was, he started looking for loopholes.

This is what we read next. **GRAPHICS: Wanting to justify himself, the attorney asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ (LUKE 10:29)**

Did you hear that, wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus another question? “Who exactly would you say my neighbor is?”

Justifying oneself is something we do in order that we might be free of guilt and shame. The attorney wanted to maintain his blameless reputation. He was an expert in the law, lacking in nothing. But now Jesus is asking him to go and do something new? This can’t be. So the attorney starts fishing. He was hoping to rid himself of additional responsibility, so that he could preserve his authority and power.

He asks, “Who do I have to love, or perhaps, more importantly, who don’t I?”

And of course, it’s in reply to this question that Jesus offers us the great and most notable story throughout the Gospels, the story of the good Samaritan.

Jesus tells the story of a man heading from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers. They beat him badly, robbed him, and left him for dead. Though two religious leaders passed by, they did not stop, nor did they help. They had other things to do; they had schedules to keep, agendas that couldn’t be flexed, or perhaps they were afraid of a potential trap or awkward encounter. Whatever it was the people of faith kept walking. They didn’t stop.

Then a Samaritan stumbled upon this beaten traveler. In the ears of Jesus’ listeners, this was the political enemy heading down the road. Samaritans were descendants of a mixed population occupying the land following an Assyrian conquest in 722 BCE. Samaritans were known for their opposition to the rebuilding of the temple and Jerusalem. Instead they chose to construct their own place of worship on Mt. Gerizim. If the Jews were Republican then the Samaritans were Democrats, or vice versa. They had an equivalent depth of faith, but different worldviews. Different opinions.

Jesus describes this Samaritan helping the beaten traveler. The Samaritan proceeded to bandage the man’s wounds, load him up on his donkey, and took him to an inn, the ancient equivalent of a hospital, all the while promising to pay his medical bills. After telling this story…Jesus asked the attorney another question. **GRAPHICS: 36Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ (Luke 10:36)**

Again, the attorney answered immediately. He knew the answer, in fact, everybody did, **GRAPHICS: 37He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ (LUKE 10:37)**

Jesus agreed and then he pushed him once more saying, ‘If you truly want to inherit eternal life then, **GRAPHICS: ‘Go and do likewise.’**

Go and do. Put these words into action. Love your neighbor sacrificially, without condition, doing whatever it takes no matter who they are or where they are. Do this and you will experience the life you’re looking for. This is how we’ll experience the kingdom of heaven.

Loving our neighbor is imperative to our identity as people of faith seeking the promise of eternal life in Christ. But in order to do so we, just like the attorney, need to know who our neighbor is. Who exactly are we supposed to love? And what does it look like? Not so that we can be free of blame, but so that we can live into the call that God has for our lives. How do we read the story of the Good Samaritan 2000 years later?

Do we take this story literally? Is our neighbor the wounded enemy lying on the side of the road? Is everyone our neighbor, as the confirmation class youth shouted out? Is it our enemies, the brokenhearted, beaten and bruised?

Or is it possible that Jesus meant what he said when he invited us to love our neighbors, as in he wanted us to focus on the people next door. Our physical neighbors. I mean, our physical neighbors are the ones we pass by on the road most frequently as we come and go. They are the ones we most frequently bump into, up and down the street we travel on a daily basis.

Perhaps Jesus was pushing us to the realization that the pathway toward eternal life cuts through each one of our neighborhoods and rests more specifically in our ability to love those around us. At a minimum it would seem like a good place to start.

I’m curious, how are you at loving your neighbors? Would you say that you love them? Do you know them? So, let me ask you this. **GRAPHIC:**

**1. D*o you know the names (not full names, just first names) of the eight households living closest to you?***

***2. Do you know something about each person other than their name that you couldn’t pick up from simply looking at their house, like do you know where they work, what they do, where they are from or some other surface level fact about them?* Lastly, since we’re called to love our neighbors, we should perhaps know something deeper about them, not just their names and occupations.**

**3. *Do you know anything deeper about them?***

How well do you know your neighbors? Take a step back and consider what this means. Sure, loving our neighbor goes beyond just our neighborhoods, it extends to the people we work with, the kids and the parents on our soccer teams and men and women who are in need of something to eat or a place to live. Loving them is important. But so are our physical neighbors. They are the people who we literally do life with. If Jesus not once, but twice commands us to go and do likewise, to love our neighbors the same way that we love God with everything we have and all that we are, then what is going on? Why aren’t we doing this?

I don’t know about you, but I’m thinking there are some good reasons why we aren’t. We are busier than ever, given work schedules, activities, travel, friends and family. Sometimes there just isn’t any time to dedicate to our neighbors. I imagine this was how the first person to pass by the man on the side of the road felt. The priest had places to go, appointments to keep. He couldn’t get dirty, use his time that way. He had too much on his plate. Sometimes this is our story as well. Sometimes we are too busy to love our neighbor. Is that you?

Yet, perhaps it’s not a matter of busyness, but maybe it’s more about fear and discomfort. Maybe we are afraid to get to know our neighbors. This could have been how the Levite felt when he passed by the man on the side of the road. It was commonly understood that robbers would set up scenes with injured people on the side of the road from Jerusalem to Jericho to get people to stop and rob them. You could be putting your life at risk by stopping to care for your neighbor. It might be that sometimes we’re afraid to meet our neighbors not because we are scared of being robbed, but maybe we’re afraid of rejection, coming across as weird or perhaps we’re afraid of what would happen if you didn’t get along, don’t become best friends, or what if they don’t want to meet you?

Regardless of our feelings or approach, the good Samaritan, the one who stopped, pushed past the barriers stopping the others before him. He employed flexibility, courage and compassion, in order to show mercy. He did whatever it took to love his neighbor, so that not only could he experience life, but so that his neighbor could experience the same.

**What can you do? What would it look like for you to go and do likewise? Go ahead, try it. Get to know those who live around you.**

**Remember: That “Love Thy Neighbor” thing . . . I meant that. - God**

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