

I

Jimmy is my new next-door neighbor. He and his wife and their infant son and their two dogs moved in a few months ago.

Kelly lives next door on the other side. She's the Dean of the Pharmacy School at UGA and she travels quite a bit in her work, so I help her out but putting her trash cans out when she's out of town.

Dr. and Mrs. Frisk live across the street in the house they built 25 years ago. Dr. Frisk is a retired pediatrician, Mrs. Frisk keeps an eye out her front window and knows everyone and everything that goes on in our neighborhood. Last summer, she hired our boys to water her tomato plants while they traveled to visit their grandkids.

Those are my neighbors. And we generally do what good neighbors do. We smile and wave when we see each other. We give each other tips on the best contractors. We let each other know when we're going to be away so we can keep an eye on each other's property. We do it because it's the right thing to, of course, to be neighborly.

But I think we also realize that because we live in such close proximity to one another, because we all have a sizeable financial investment in the value of our neighborhood, we have a sense that we have a mutual shared interest. When Jimmy put up a fence to keep in his dogs, that affected the look of

my backyard. When Kelly had her driveway power-washed this spring, it brought into sharp relief how dingy mine had become. So when someone asks the question, "Who are your neighbors?" I instantly think about Jimmy and Kelly and Dr. and Mrs. Frisk.

II

And I think we all do that. I bet right now, at this very minute, you're thinking about the people next door or across the street. Because when we think of our neighbors, we tend to think first of those people who live and move and have their being in the closest proximity to ourselves, for the simple reason that we have a sense of shared investment and mutuality with them, whoever they may be.

Some of us might not like our neighbors, some of us might not even know their names, but all of us have a sense that there are people who live not so very far away from us, and at least by the most basic geographic definition, whether we know them or not, whether we like them or not, they are our neighbors.

And if you've been around church for any length of time, you've probably heard at least one sermon or bible study about the biblical admonition to love your neighbor as you would love yourself. It's good ethics, it's good theology, it's good to be neighborly to those who live near you.

III

And so it's an odd question that this lawyer asks Jesus. In the tenth chapter of the gospel according to Luke, a young hotshot lawyer decides to test Jesus, to see if he really knows what he's talking about. And so he stands up and he says, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus, not willing to be baited, retorts, in Ryan's revised translation, "You're the lawyer, hot shot. What's written in the law?" And the lawyer quotes Jesus chapter and verse, Deuteronomy 6:4, as he replies, "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."

And Jesus says, "Yep, you've got the concept down. Do it, and you'll live."

But the lawyer wasn't through with Jesus just yet. The lawyer wanted to justify himself, and so he said, "And who is my neighbor?"

Who is my neighbor? Because if Jesus will go ahead and draw the boundaries around who is a neighbor, then the lawyer will know where the line is between neighbors and "those other people." And if Jesus will draw those boundaries using racial or religious or tribal or geographic lines, so much the better, because let's face it, it's always easier to be neighborly to those people who look like you, pray like you, vote like you, and who you see riding bikes or taking walks on your street.

But once again, Jesus doesn't take the bait. Instead, he begins to tell a

story. So I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from Luke 10, beginning at the 29<sup>th</sup> verse.

*Jesus replied, "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. 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. 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 denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."*

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Jerusalem sits on a series of hills about 1,200 feet above sea level. Jericho is just 20 or 30 miles to the east where the Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea, but Jericho is more than 1,000 feet below sea level. And so when Jesus says a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, he wasn't traveling down as

in traveling south, like from Athens to Madison. He was going down rapidly in elevation. It was a twisty, winding, dangerous road, and highway robbery was not an uncommon occurrence.

And so it happened that this man fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him of everything he possessed, beat him mercilessly, and left him half-dead there by the roadside. Along came a priest, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he saw the man lying by the roadside, he passed by on the other side.

Now, we might cluck our tongues and say, “Huh, what hypocrites!” But remember, it was a dangerous road, and robbery was not uncommon. It was also not unheard of for robbers to pose as robbery victims in hopes of luring a victim into an ambush. Perhaps the priest did not stop for to touch a bleeding body would make him ritually unclean and therefore unfit for duty during his next shift in the Jerusalem Temple. Perhaps the Levite did not stop because he was already late for a meeting of the Jericho Road Safety Improvement Association. In any case, Jesus himself does not render judgment on the actions of the priest and the Levite, he simply reports that they passed by on the other side.

But the surprise of the story comes next. A Samaritan saw the man bleeding, and he was moved with pity. He went and bandaged the wounds, pouring expensive oil and wine on them.

Then he put him on his own animal, secured safe lodging for him, and the next day paid the innkeeper and promised to pay whatever expenses were necessary.

It’s not just the extravagant generosity and hospitality that is the shocker in the story. It’s that the extravagant generosity and hospitality was provided by a *Samaritan*. Samaritans and Jews had no dealings. Jews considered Samaritans to be religiously and racially impure, a tribal squabble that went back hundreds of years. Samaritans were supposed to know their place and to keep to themselves. So the fact that a Jewish rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth tells a story wherein the hero is a *Samaritan* is supposed to be shocking. A Good Samaritan was supposed to be an oxymoron. It just did not compute.

And then Jesus hits the punchline. He says to the hotshot young lawyer, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who had fallen into the hands of the robbers?” The lawyer gave the only acceptable answer. “The one who showed mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go, and do likewise.”

Jesus refuses to draw the boundaries of a neighbor around lines of race, tribe, geography, history, or politics. A neighbor is any fellow traveler along the dangerous Jericho Road of life. And a good neighbor is the one who shows mercy.

#### IV

My friend, some of your fellow travelers on the road are hurting so very badly right now. They have been stripped, robbed, and beaten, in some cases quite literally, by the systemic racism that still plagues our nation.

And so they are crying out in their pain and pleading for justice and mercy and righteousness. When they say “Black Lives Matter,” they’re not suggesting for a minute that the lives of the other travelers on the Jericho Road aren’t important – they’re saying, “Somebody, anybody, please come and help us, because we’ve been beaten and robbed and left for dead by the side of the road.”

You can cross by to the other side. You wouldn’t be the first, and you certainly won’t be the last. Maybe you’ve got good and sound reasons for doing so. Maybe you think the people crying out are exaggerating or they’re part of some larger sinister plot. Whatever your reasons, you can cross by to the other side and go about your business.

It’s our natural human instinct to look out for ourselves first – to ask, “What might happen to me if I stop? Might I get hurt? Might I incur the ridicule of my family and friends? Might I suffer financially? I’d like to help, but I don’t really have time to get involved.”

But good neighbors reverse the question. They don’t ask, “What might happen to me if I stop to help?” Instead, good neighbors ask, “What might happen to my fellow traveler if I don’t?”

A good neighbor is not defined by Jesus along boundaries of race or geography or religion or politics. A good neighbor is defined by Jesus by one thing – one who shows mercy.

My friend, your fellow travelers on the Jericho Road are hurting. They’re frightened. They’re crying out for mercy.

And maybe you don’t have time or expertise to bandage wounds. Maybe you’re fresh out of oil and wine. Maybe you’re short of funds for springing for a room for a couple of nights. That doesn’t mean you can’t show mercy to your fellow traveler.

Sometimes, all that’s needed to show mercy is to stop yourself when you find you’re about to say to your hurting neighbor, “yes, but...”

Sometimes, all that’s needed to show mercy is to be slow to speak and quick to listen.

Sometimes, all that’s need to show mercy is to look someone in the eye.

Sometimes, all that’s needed to show mercy is to say, “I don’t understand, but I’m willing to stand with you.”

Sometimes, all that’s needed to show mercy is to stand on the corner and offer a bottle of water to fellow travelers on a hot summer afternoon.

V

I was proud of our church yesterday afternoon. I am blessed to serve alongside some truly gifted colleagues, and they created a beautiful prayer station in front of the church. Hundreds of passersby took notice, and dozens participated by tying strips of ribbon along the railings, and in a small but tangible way, we carried out our mission to share the love of Christ with Athens and the world.

But my friends, we have so much more work to do. This is our bicentennial year, and it's a natural time for reflecting on where we've been, who we are, and where we're going. And when it comes to issues of systemic racism, we must not ignore or whitewash our own history. We can celebrate our church's past and be critical of it at the same time, just as we do with our own families and other institutions we know and love. The church was never meant to be a country club for saints, but rather a hospital for sinners. So we've come a long way in 200 years, but we have so much more work to do.

This past January, the session of the church began laying plans for having some critical conversations about race during our bicentennial year. We planned to begin those conversations about the 30 elders and two pastors that make up the session, and then begin widening the circle out to the larger congregation. We had planned to partner with the Diversity and Inclusion Office of the Athens-Clarke County Government to help facilitate those

conversations, but the emergence of the pandemic put those plans on hold.

But we are going to begin those conversations, and soon. We're not going to let them fall off the table. And they're going to be uncomfortable. They're going to make us want to cross to the other side of the road. And perhaps some of us will. But good neighbors don't ask, "What might happen to our church if we have these difficult conversations? Will people get mad? Will people leave? Will they cut off their financial support?"

Good neighbors always reverse the conversation. They don't ask, "What might happen to our church if we have these conversations? Instead, they ask, "What might happen to our world if we don't?"

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

Amen.