

I

Some of the best and most important conversations I've ever had have happened on long road trips. Years ago, well before we had children, my wife Amy and I took a long road trip with another couple. In a week's time, we drove from Atlanta all the way to eastern Utah and back. Over the course of that week, the four of us had some great conversations, and even though it was 15 years ago now, we still remember and tell stories and laugh about that week we spent together on the road.

II

There's something about a long road trip that just fosters good conversation, isn't there? Maybe it's because no one is on their home "turf" on a road trip, and many of the tasks and distractions of daily life are temporarily suspended. There's something about traveling together that heightens the senses and makes you more in tune with what's going on around you. On a road trip, there's nothing like a good conversation to help pass the miles. And just this past Wednesday, Carol read for us a passage about Jesus and his disciples setting out on a long road trip.

III

This winter and spring, we've been reading and preaching our way through the gospel of Luke, and up to this point, most of the action in the gospel has been centered in the northern part of the Land of Promise in a region called Galilee.

Galilee was Jesus' home territory. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but when he was very young, his family settled in a town called Nazareth in the northern part of the Land of Promise in a region of Galilee. When Jesus began his public ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing, it started on his home turf.

But on Wednesday, Carol read a key passage in Luke's gospel, wherein Jesus and his disciples began a road trip headed to the south, with a final destination of Jerusalem. In fact, the passages that we will read for the next several weeks, leading all the way into Holy Week, will be stories that happen during this trip south.

In order to get from Galilee in the north to Jerusalem in the south, the group will travel through a region called Samaria. In order to understand some of the context of these road trip stories, it's helpful to know something about the history between Jews and Samaritans, as the people of Samaria were called.

These two groups had once been one people, as siblings of one family and citizens of one nation, but there was much hard history between them, much water under the bridge, and memories were long and fuses were short.

I won't go into all of that history here, much of it from a period of about 1,000 years before the birth of Jesus and outlined in detail in the Hebrew Scriptures, but

suffice it to say that by the time Jesus and his disciples set out to go from Galilee to Jerusalem via the heart of Samaria, the feelings between Jews and Samaritans were hard, to say the least.

Again, there's a long history, complicated history here, but Jews and Samaritans had once been siblings and fellow citizens in a unified nation. But centuries before, there had been a painful and violent civil war, and although the killing had largely stopped, the hatred and distrust between the two groups largely remained.

By the time Jesus and the disciples had come of age as young Jewish men, their culture had taught them that their people were the "true Israelites," whereas the Samaritans were half-breeds and sell-outs and as people who were not to be associated with or trusted. And generally speaking, the same things were taught in Samaritan homes about the Jews.

So on Wednesday, Carol read for us from Luke 9, beginning at the 51st verse, the beginning of Jesus long road trip, when, as Luke puts it, Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem."

But as they left Galilee, they came to a Samaritan village, and when the Samaritan villagers saw that they were Jews on their way to Jerusalem, they rolled up the sidewalks and shut the doors and windows and put out the "No vacancy" signs. And James and John, being the loyal Jews that they were, and seeing how the hated Samaritans had refused them even basic hospitality, which in both ancient and modern Near Eastern culture is a major social faux pas, they said to Jesus, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"

I don't know if James and John were being literal or figurative, but we know that sentiment. We know that impulse. They were insulted by the Samaritans, who they regarded as lesser people than themselves to begin with, so their first inclination was to respond with verbal or maybe even physical violence.

Luke doesn't tell us precisely what Jesus said in response to his disciples' unsolicited offer of an airstrike. All he says is that he turned and rebuked them, and they went on their way to another village. But I can't help but wonder if Jesus didn't file James and John's comments about the Samaritans away in the back of his mind as the road trip continued.

And that leads us to our text for this morning, a reading from the Gospel of Luke, beginning at the 10th chapter at the 25th verse. Listen now for a Word from God.

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He 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.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” 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.”

Who is my neighbor? At first glance, it seems like an innocuous, even downright ridiculous question, doesn't it? But the lawyer wasn't asking Jesus to about the people living next door. The lawyer was trying to bait Jesus into defining the boundaries of the neighborhood.

Because if Jesus will go ahead and define the boundaries of who is a neighbor, then it logically follows that anyone who does not meet that definition is not a neighbor, and therefore, falls outside the biblical injunction to love them as we love ourselves.

If Jesus will define the boundaries of who is a neighbor along religious or tribal or racial lines, so much the better, because let's be honest, it's always easier to love, or at least get along with, people who look like us, speak like us, think like us, vote like us, and live like us.

Who is my neighbor? The lawyer was fully prepared for an abstract theological debate. But instead, Jesus began to tell a story.

But by the end of the parable, Jesus is the one asking the questions. “Which one of these three, do you think, was a neighbor?”

“The one who showed mercy,” is the only acceptable answer.

And I wonder if James and John's cheeks were burning as they listened to Jesus teach this shocking parable, as they thought about their offer to Jesus to rain down fire on that Samaritan village.

Because remember, Jesus is teaching a parable – a made-up story to illustrate a larger point. And the scandal and the sting of this parable is that as Jesus told the story,

he intentionally placed the Samaritan as the one who saw past the history and the hatred. He intentionally placed the Samaritan as the one who showed extravagant mercy and grace and generosity. He intentionally placed the Samaritan as the neighbor.

According to Jesus, a neighbor is not defined by where one lives, or how one prays, or how one loves, or how one votes. According to Jesus, a neighbor is defined by only one criterion – by what one *does*. A neighbor, according to Jesus, is one who shows mercy.

IV

But my goodness, my friend, you and I live and move and have our being in a world that seems to have little or no use for mercy. You and I live and move and have our being in a world that seems to think that mercy is for the weak, that mercy is only for chumps and losers and suckers. You and I live in a world filled with ancient rivalries, long memories, and short fuses.

But my friend, mercy isn't for the weak. Mercy is required if we are to survive as a species.

I know this isn't news to you, but we human beings are not the biggest or strongest or fastest living things that inhabit this earth. We do not possess the sharpest or longest teeth or claws.

But what God has bestowed upon our species is an incredible ability to communicate and to form social bonds so that we might work alongside one another as neighbors. And when we do that, we can overcome incredible obstacles.

Just this past week, our species landed a vehicle on another planet. And it wasn't even the first time we did it. We didn't heave it there with our big muscles. We worked together as neighbors. We leaned heavily on the lessons handed onto us by our forbearers. We listened to one person's idea and worked together to make it an even better idea. We used our social networks and our collective social power to marshal resources to meet the challenge.

And in a little over a century, we've gone from the first powered flight that traveled a few hundred feet at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, to a group of people sitting in a control room California remotely parking cars on Mars.

But here's the bizarre paradox of the times in which we live. This very same week, millions of our fellow citizens were transported backward in time by two centuries. For days on end, they had no electricity, no running water, no reliable and safe way to heat their homes, and dangerously low food supplies, and the cost is still being counted this morning.

The stories emerging of people acting as good neighbors in this disaster are myriad. People are opening their homes and businesses and churches to give food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, and shelter to the shivering. Neighbors helping neighbors.

But how does this kind of paradox happen? How can the very same people land a car on the Red Planet but can't keep the lights on south of the Red River?

Honestly, my friend, I worry about us. I worry that we are losing our ability to see and hear each other. I worry that we are losing our respect for the lessons learned and passed down to us by our forbearers. I worry that we are in danger of losing our basic human ability to work together to solve problems. I worry that we are all too often more interested in calling down fire from heaven than we are in showing mercy, or kindness, or love. I worry that we are drawing ever-smaller circles around who is us, and who is *them*.

About sixty years ago, during another time of both great human achievement and great human strife, another preacher from Georgia shared that same concern. He wrote:

No longer can we engage in the luxury of passing by on the other side. Such folly was once considered moral failure; today it will lead to universal suicide. We cannot long survive spiritually separated in a world that is geographically together. In the final analysis, I must not ignore the wounded man on life's Jericho Road, because he is a part of me and I am a part of him.¹

Who is your neighbor, my friend?

He is a part of you, and you are a part of him.

She is a part of you, and you are a part of her.

And the command from Scripture is clear and unambiguous. You are to love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Nowhere does Jesus say that you have to like them.

Nowhere does Jesus say you have to endorse or baptize or even tolerate ideas that they might espouse that are hurtful or mean or antithetical to the gospel.

Nowhere does it say that you have to like it if they don't love you back.

But you *have* to love them. Jesus said so.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr, "On Being a Good Neighbor," in *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 38.

Mercy is not for the weak, my friend. Mercy is the way of Christ.

V

When I was a boy, our church always sang the same closing hymn every Sunday. And the refrain went like this – *And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, they will know that we are Christians by our love.*

One basic definition of love is the willingness to put someone else's needs above your own. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the true neighbor showed love by putting his financial resources, his time, and in fact, his very well-being on the line for the one who had been beaten and left for dead.

As our congregation embarks on our third century of our life together, how will they know that we are Christians?

It won't be because of the sign on the door. It won't be because of a statement of faith or a long list of precepts and positions posted to a Web site.

It will be because of our love – not just that we share with each other for a few hours on a few Sunday mornings a month.

It will be because of the way in which we love our neighbors – the ones who look like us, and the ones who don't. The ones who pray like us, and the ones who don't. The ones who share our politics, and the ones who don't.

Which of these, do you suppose, was a neighbor? Jesus asked.

The one who showed mercy, came the answer.

Go and do likewise, is the command.

Thanks be to God. Amen.