

Luke 10:25-37  
July 14, 2019

## Neighbor

Most of my life I have had pretty good neighbors. I don't much remember trouble from anyone; too much noise, or some ugly eyesore because someone parked a car in their front yard and began to take it apart and then left it unfinished, or something like that.

With only a few exceptions my neighbors have been friendly enough in casual encounters; quiet, willing to help if needed and not much of a burden. Most of the time, I have been able to live as if they were not there, and I have tried not to be a bother to them in return.

I am thinking, of course, in terms of those with whom I have lived in close proximity; the next two or three doors down, the one's who could hear if I turned the music up too loud, and the ones I could hear if they got into an argument with one another.

I have categorized them in my mind:

1 - Those I really like because in addition to not bothering me in any way, they were actually engaging and I could develop a friendship with them.

2 - Those who merely respected boundaries, minded their own business, and not been too much of a bother.

3 - And three, those who *were* a bother, noisy dangerous, unfriendly, etc. The ones that from time-to-

time I was tempted to call the police to come about something.

Most of my life I have lived in close proximity to people who fit into categories one and two. The occasional "cat 3" have been few and far between, thankfully. That is what I meant when I said that I have had good neighbors.

## Leviticus 19:8

If the evolutionists are in any sense right and the earth is much older than people had previously thought and humanity has been around much longer than previously known, maybe a few hundred thousand years, or something like that, then the instructions given in the Levitical code of the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, which is only about 2.5 or 3 thousand years old, are recent in human history.

Sociologists and anthropologists claim that up until 5,000 years ago, or so, most people lived in small nomadic tribes, living from day-to-day, always threatened by the presence of other people with whom they were nearly always at war.

It is an innovation of more staid farm-based societies that we first see this idea, "Love your neighbor as yourself," which we first find in Leviticus 19:18. Of course, we see this text quoted several times in the New Testament, the gospels, the epistles, Paul and the others. It is everywhere now, on t-shirts and billboards and people hashtag it.

## Bible Interpretation

Let me speak for just a moment about the way we interpret the Bible. You will hear some people call themselves “literalists,” taking the plain and simple meaning of the text. You will also hear others speak of the historical methods, which often seem esoteric, sometimes concluding the Bible means something different than what it appears to be saying.

There are two (I hate to set up a dualism, but in this case it is helpful) premises. The first is that words have meaning regardless of context, so that one can hear a text read that was first spoken in another place and time, and without an attempt to understand the context, one know what it means, the word’s have universal meaning.

The second premise is really the opposite, that words have meaning *only in* context, which means to understand the Bible, one must give great care to the various contexts. And yes, it is sometimes true that it sometimes doesn’t mean what it apparently says. (I feel the need for examples here. For instance, the specific instructions about the Temple sacrifices in Deuteronomy that we don’t follow, or the dietary laws, or the instruction for slaves to obey their masters, that offers an implied affirmation of the institution of slavery, come to mind).

I do not want to disparage the “literal” approach too much when I say that I believe very strongly that context matters, and that is why the so-called

“historical methods” are important. Sometimes there are statements in the Bible that *do* seem to have a plain meaning that rises above any consideration of context. If there ever was a case, this would seem to be it, how could anyone misunderstand, “Love your neighbor as yourself?” What could be ambiguous about that?

And Yet

And yet, that confusion is exactly what has happened here in this great Lukan text. The question has been asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The answer has been given rightly, from the great texts of Deuteronomy and Leviticus,

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind,” and “Love your neighbor as yourself,” case closed.

But not so fast (I sound like Lee Corso on College Game Day). What seems to be clear turns out to be fuzzy. “And who is my neighbor?” It appears that what is plain and should be taken literally, isn’t so plain after all. Jesus tells a story.

The Samaritan

The story is very familiar so one doesn’t feel much need to go into detail about it. A man was beaten and left for dead. A couple of highly regarded religious people came by and acted as though nothing had happened. Then a “Samaritan” passed by, stopped,

and took care of the person who had been beaten. The choice of a Samaritan is meant to be provocative because it is someone outside the audience's box, not normally considered a neighbor, someone they had de-humanized in their mind.

Then Jesus says, "who is the neighbor?" which doesn't really answer the question because it opens up a Pandora's box. If Samaritans are neighbors, at least the good ones, then who is not? We are meant to conclude that every person of good will is a neighbor. "Go and do likewise," Jesus said. We are meant to give care that we ourselves become good neighbors.

### Neighbor Re-defined

The temptation is to try and contemporize the illustration (which means to contextualize it) by selecting from modern examples of despised people and fit them into story in the place of the Samaritan. Examples might be that the person who shows empathy is anyone from a Muslim to a gay person to a white supremacist depending on the audience and what it would take to shock them. I have done this before, even here in this place

But let us remember the question that got all this started, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The parable is about the relationship of a person with God. Thus it is an attempt to address one of life's "ultimate" questions; "what is the meaning of life," or something like that.

In the next story, Jesus is at Martha and Mary's house and Jesus commends Mary for taking interest in the "one thing needful." In its way, that is what the parable encourages us to do. What is the "one thing needful?"

Whatever we say about eternal life and how it is inherited, we will end up with a broader definition of who is a neighbor and with a stronger conviction that we must *be* better neighbors.

When I thought about my neighbors, I thought only of those close to me, most of whom have been pretty good. I am forced by this parable to give up that definition. Proximity has nothing to do with it. If a person puts two feet down somewhere on this planet, that is proximity enough, they are neighbors, I am to love them.

The one thing needful regards our relation to God, and God and neighbor are linked, we can't give consideration to one without the other. I will leave you with this; who in the world do you *not* think of as your neighbor? Perhaps even, who do you think of as monstrous, cat 3? Plug them into the parable in the Samaritan's place. Keep on until it offends you and then stew on it for awhile.

But remember, mainly, it is not about the neighbor, but about your relation to God. Stew about that for awhile too.

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