

Proper 10 C Sermon  
Luke 10:25-37  
July 10, 2022

“The Space Between”  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*<sup>25</sup>Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>26</sup>He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” <sup>27</sup>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.” <sup>28</sup>And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” <sup>29</sup>But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” <sup>30</sup>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. <sup>31</sup>Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup>So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup>But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. <sup>34</sup>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. <sup>35</sup>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.’ <sup>36</sup>Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” <sup>37</sup>He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”*

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A Sunday School teacher was telling the story of the Good Samaritan to her class of 4 & 5-year-olds. She was making it as

vivid as possible to keep the children interested in her tale. At one point, she asked the class, “If you saw a person lying on the roadside all wounded and bleeding, what would you do?” A thoughtful little girl broke the silence, “I think I'd throw up.”<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps you would not throw up, but the question is still worth asking: If you saw a person lying on the roadside all wounded and bleeding, what would you do? Sitting here in church this morning considering this story, I'm guessing that most of us tell ourselves that we'd stop and offer assistance.

In a now-famous Princeton study, psychologists determined to test a couple of things that might influence helping behavior. First, they wanted to find out if thinking religious thoughts would inspire altruistic behavior and, second, they wanted to test the effects of time pressure on helping behavior. The researchers decided to conduct their experiment at Princeton Theological Seminary. Students (future pastors) were asked to prepare a 3 to 5-minute talk about being a minister. Some students were also asked to reference the story of the Good Samaritan. While they were working, a research assistant would interrupt the students and tell them that they should head across campus to finish their remarks. Some students were told that they had plenty of time to get there. Others were told that they should get right over. And still others were told that they were already late. Along the way, the researchers had staged an emergency—an actor sitting slumped in a doorway, head down, eyes closed, not moving, and coughing as the students walked by. What do you think happened?

Firstly, the researchers found that students who were preparing to give a talk on ministry with reference to the story of the Good Samaritan were no more likely to help than the other students. The researchers even noted that “*on several occasions, a seminary*

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<sup>1</sup> “Good Samaritan,” Jokesoftheday.net, July 22, 2011,  
<http://www.jokesoftheday.net/joke-Good-Samaritan/2011072227>.

*student going to give his talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan literally stepped over the victim as he hurried on his way!”*

Secondly, the researchers found that hurrying *did* affect helpfulness. Students who were in a hurry were much less helpful to the person in need, compared to students who weren't in any rush to get there. When people were too concerned about being late, they either didn't notice or failed to give aid to the person who could have been dealing with a serious emergency.<sup>2</sup>

Pretty telling research, wouldn't you say? As we sit in church this morning, thinking religious thoughts and feeling just a little more pious for being here, it's tempting to tell ourselves that we'd stop and offer assistance. Maybe *you* would. Then again, maybe not.

Far from the beloved childhood moral fable it's become, in its original context the Good Samaritan dug deep at the divisions that plagued Jesus' society. Israelites had long seen Samaritans as their religious and social inferiors. In truth, they were descended of the same ancestors, but time, war and occupation, and tradition had separated them. Jesus' Jewish audience loathed, scorned, abhorred, hated Samaritans utterly and the feeling was reciprocated by Samaritans toward Jewish folks. And yet, in Jesus' story, after the two Jewish religious figures saw the wounded man and passed by on the other side of the road without stopping to help, it was a Samaritan who saw the man, drew close to him—closed the space between himself and the wounded man, and showed him compassion.

In our text from Luke's gospel, the young lawyer asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life and Jesus responded to him with a story about seeing someone in need and drawing close enough for

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<sup>2</sup> Glen Geher, "My Favorite Study," Psychologytoday.com, March 16, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/darwins-subterranean-world/201703/my-favorite-psychology-study>.

relationship—for compassion. With a parable, Jesus says to the young lawyer: “You want to inherit eternal life, to see the realm of heaven? See your neighbor and draw close in friendship, in mutuality, in understanding, in compassion. That’s where you’ll experience the kingdom.”

Friends, Jesus’ message wasn’t *just* intended for the young lawyer. It’s for us too. Our neighbors are not *just* the folks we live next to, who water our flowers when we go on vacation, or let the dog out when we see a show in the city, or loan us a cup of sugar when we’re baking a cake. Our neighbors are not *just* the ones we share a pew with in church or even the ones we volunteer with at Greenman School or the Interfaith Food Pantry.

Our neighbors are the ones who scandalize us with compassion . . . Our neighbors are the ones who upend all the entrenched categories and shock us with a fresh face of God. Our neighbors are the ones who mercifully step over the ancient bloodied lines separating ‘us’ from ‘them,’ and teach us the real meaning of ‘Good.’<sup>3</sup>

We need these kinds of neighbors in our world today. And we need to be these kinds of neighbors.

In this nation, a land rife with violence, division, inequity, bigotry, and hatred, what must *we* do to see the realm of heaven, I wonder? I have a feeling that Jesus’ answer to us would be the same as it was to the young lawyer—we have to learn to be a neighbor. We have to learn to start seeing, really seeing, the ones typically labeled “strangers” and “others.” We have to close the space between us and them—drawing close enough to know them for who they are, for what they need, for what they offer, for what they dream—drawing close and sharing compassion. It is not enough to

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<sup>3</sup> Debie Thomas. “Go and do likewise,” Journeywithjesus.net, July 7, 2016, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1023-go-and-do-likewise>.

walk across on the other side of the road, to keep one another at arms length, to help from a distance. This is a time in our nation for drawing close to one another, for dismantling walls, and building bridges, and becoming a people marked by mutual care, understanding, compassion, and a shared future of hope and possibility for all.

And that's exactly what the Samaritan did in Jesus' story—he broke down the wall of enmity between his people and the wounded man's people; he saw the man as a fellow human being and a sibling in a common human family; he entered into caring relationship with the man and served and supported him, inviting the wounded man into relationship with himself; and one relationship at a time, the Samaritan began the slow but sure process of changing his world.

Friends, the mission of the church—of New England Church—is about nothing less than transforming our broken world. It's about seeing all people as siblings in a common human family. It's about nurturing deep relationship with others through life's ups and downs. It's about people, motivated by love, changing our world by closing the space between *us* and *them*.

In the economy and elegance of the bard, Australian poet Donna Goddard beautifully captures the sentiment I hoped to communicate in this sermon. I close now with her words. Let us:

*Forget the chasm [between us]  
So jaded with angry dreams.  
Our fear is empty-handed.  
Love's hand has room for the other.<sup>4</sup>*

May it be so with us. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Donna Goddard. "Strange Words: Poems and Prayers," 2020, pg. 36.