

“Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”

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²⁵ An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” ²⁷ 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.” ²⁸ And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

²⁹ But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ 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.’ ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” ³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

It's a stressful time to see a neighbor's home go on the market. Sure, it's stressful for the neighbor, wondering if and how quickly their home might sell and if they'll meet or exceed their asking price. But, I'll argue, it can be an equally stressful time for us—the ones not moving. We have concerns of our own, don't we? Will the house become a rental or be owner-occupied? Will we get along with whoever moves in? Will they take good care of the place? Will they have a loud dog? Will they share our commitment to lawn maintenance? Will they still let us use the swimming pool? We have a vested interest in who the new neighbors will be, because, unless you live in the country or on a really sizeable lot, our lives are going to intersect, at least a little.

The house next door to mine recently sold. The contractor's offer beat out the young couple hoping to buy their first home. I expected to start seeing flippers arrive shortly after closing to begin the work of updating the home for resale in a few months. But that isn't what happened. The lawn was cut and trimmed, a vegetable garden went in, and loads of people started showing up to work on cars in the backyard. I've seen some mattresses and a few odds and ends go inside, but no other furniture. I wave over the fence, but when I tried to talk with a few of the folks there, I discovered an impassable language barrier. I'm discovering that it's uncomfortable for me not to know who my neighbors are.

The legal expert in our reading from Luke's gospel was also uncomfortable with that question. He knew exactly what to do – love God and love neighbor as self. He just wasn't sure who to do it to – who his neighbor really was. After all, the world is a big place and, even back then, it was full of people. Who should we consider our neighbors, beneficiaries of our love and care? Surely not everyone! As is so often the case, Jesus' response doesn't actually answer the man's question. But we do get a really good story.

Jesus says that a man was headed to Jericho from Jerusalem when he was attacked by robbers and left for dead. He was ignored by both a priest and a Levite before being attended to by a Samaritan. The Samaritan ministered to his needs and paid for his recovery at an inn.

The lawyer's question was a simple one: "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus' response, however, was not so simple. Instead of prescribing limits or setting boundaries to determine who the man's neighbors are, Jesus tells him how to be a neighbor – how to love. For Jesus, the question should not have been *who*, but *how* to love.

In Jesus' day, Samaritans and Jewish people were not on good terms. "The Samaritans were Israelites with entrenched opposition to the Jewish ways of understanding their shared tradition."¹ While geographically located next door, "the two nations claimed different locations for the Temple, different versions of the Torah, and alternative lines of priests."²

To Jesus' audience, the Samaritan wasn't just a surprising hero—he was the *wrong* one. He was the outsider, the heretic, the one no one listening to Jesus would trust. Jesus didn't just tell a nice story about kindness; he deliberately made the hated outsider the role model. It would've been offensive. In naming a Samaritan the hero of his story, Jesus stretches his audiences to consider not just how to love our neighbors, but how to love our neighbors who may also be our enemies.

Fast forward to today, it's not difficult to imagine contemporary stand-ins for the enemy-neighbors in this story, the injured Jewish man and the neighborly Samaritan. We live in a nation of enemy-neighbors, don't we? We live in a nation where half of the population has entrenched opposition to the way the other half understands its shared tradition. We live in a

¹ Commentary by Amy-Jill Levine. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pg. 543.

² Ibid., 542.

nation currently obsessed with determining who belongs here, who has rights here, and how far those rights extend. For us, this story could just as easily have been the parable of the good White Sox fan or the good Cubs fan, the good Democrat or the good Republican; the good Texan or the good Illinoisan; the good liberal or the good conservative; the good evangelical Christian or the good progressive Christian.

This story wraps us up in it and makes the same demands of us that it made to Jesus' audience so long ago. It shows us how to love, not who. And "like the lawyer, we are left not with the question 'Who is my neighbor?' but with the much harder one: 'Will *I* choose to *be* a neighbor?'"³ Will we choose to love? May it be so. Amen.

³Jennifer S. Wyant. "Commentary on Luke 10:25-37," Workingpreacher.org, July 13, 2025: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-15-3/commentary-on-luke-1025-37-6>.