

“Ministering Grace and Love”

Introduction: In the days leading up to our presidential election, most of us said something like, “I’ll be so glad when all this is over.” Well, the political sniping may have ended, at least for the time being, but for several groups of people, “all this” is far from over. In fact, things have only gotten worse since November 8. Asian young adults with whom Rama works in Cambridge have heard shouts directed at them from passing cars, “Go back to China!” Chinese international students at Gordon Conwell have had racial slurs hurled at them while walking on the streets of S. Hamilton. And one student reports that a friend of a friend, a Muslim, while walking in suburban Chicago, had someone come up behind her, pull off her head covering, and snarl, “Go hang yourself. You are no longer welcome here.”

Friends, we have a serious neighbor issue in our nation! Perhaps it’s an issue we’ve always struggled with, but recently it seems to be rising more and more to the surface. As we think of what it means to be a missional church, we probably couldn’t start the church year this advent season with a more appropriate “sign” than that of ministering grace and love, the next in our series of seven. And we probably couldn’t have a more appropriate text to help us think about this than the parable Jesus told about a good Samaritan. Who *is* our neighbor? Are we willing to be one? According to Jesus, our neighbor is anyone whose need we see who God has put us in a position to meet, regardless of race, class, gender, or any other distinction we might be tempted to make.

I. Who’s Testing Whom?

A. The action begins when an “expert in the law,” an Old Testament Bible scholar, thought he would put Jesus to the test. Never a good idea! But, he was really just doing his job for it was the role of these scholars to keep God’s word from being misused by those who might be trying to drum up authority for themselves. Seventy-two of Jesus’ followers had just returned from an enormously powerful and successful mission in Samaritan territory and this scholar began to wonder, “Who is this guy? What is he all about? Is he a false prophet or an authentic representative of the LORD?”

B. The question the scholar asked was a good one, a standard one, and possibly one the scholar has been pondering for himself: “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” To put it another way, how do we find the life that is truly life, to get in sync with what God is doing in the world? Jesus, no rookie at this asking of questions game, sees a prime teaching opportunity and so asks a question of his own: “What is written in the law? How do you read it?” The scholar gives the very best of biblical answers: “Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” It’s the best summary of the law possible, known as the Great Commandment, because it is the answer Jesus himself gave when asked by another expert in the law to name the greatest commandment (Ma. 22:34-40).

C. The man had done well. Jesus affirmed him. Then he turned the test on its head: “Do this and you will live.”

Illustration: Early on in his spiritual classic, *The Imitation of Christ*, Thomas a Kempis warns against what he calls “Intellectual acrobatics.” That is, acquiring knowledge for the sake of acquiring it and being able to think highly of oneself. Of learned individuals like this, a Kempis writes: “Would that their living had

been equal to their learning; then they would have studied and lectured to good purpose. How many perish in the world because of useless learning and for caring little about the service of God!" (p. 7).

Our learning must turn into living; our knowledge must lead to doing if it's to do us and others any good. "Blessed are those who hear my words and put them into practice," Jesus exhorts elsewhere. The scholar tells Jesus what he knows. "Put it into practice," Jesus replies. This is when the scholar begins to dance, trying to keep the game of questions going.

II. The Dancing Scholar and The Shocking Story

A. "And who is my neighbor?" the scholar asks. He asks, notice, to justify himself. It's what we do, isn't it, when we have a sneaking suspicion that we're somehow in the wrong. "The speed limit sign was blocked by those branches so I couldn't see it clearly!" we cry out to the policeman who is writing us a ticket. "You must've given that assignment when I was in bed with the flu," we plead with our professor when we realize we haven't done our homework. "I had to work the night shift," we say to our pastor when he wonders why we fell asleep during church. The scholar wanted to justify himself, he was looking for a loophole, for a way to somehow limit or exclude someone from being considered a neighbor. For him, God is the God of Israel and neighbors are all Jewish...aren't they, maybe, possibly, please oh please tell me that it is so, the man seems to be asking.

B. Jesus determines that the best way forward is to stop all the questions and tell a story, a story that was meant to shock the socks off its listeners. It's a very familiar one to us. A man, presumably Jewish, is traveling on the very dangerous 17-mile road that runs from Jerusalem down to the badlands of Jericho. It's filled with twists and turns through canyons and by caves, all good places for bad guys to hide. Some were and took full advantage of this lone traveler; he was mugged, stripped, robbed, and left for dead. Two Jewish religious leaders come by, one at a time, but neither stop. They in fact cross over to the other side of the road to get as far away as possible. Possibly they have religious business to attend to and didn't want to risk becoming impure by touching a body that could be dead. Jesus doesn't tell us why because why is not the point. Then a third fellow comes along. He is identified as a Samaritan, a people group that has been engaged in serious hostility with the Jews for centuries. But, remarkably, he stops and cares for the man in a holistic way. He disinfects his wounds, bandages him, takes him to an inn, and provides the means for care over the course of the man's recovery.

Illustration: We have a hard time, I think, understanding the shock of the story. So, before we get to its conclusion, it's worth trying to think about how Jesus might have told it today. Here are a couple of possible versions. The mugged man could be an unemployed laborer from a red state, the leaders who walked by a couple of "blue" members of Congress in town for a conference, and the one who stopped to offer grace and love an undocumented worker from Mexico. Or the mugged man could be the lead pastor of a prominent mega-church, the two who passed Christians on short-term mission, and the one who stopped to offer grace and love a young black Muslim woman. Grace, undeserved favor, and love giving ourselves for the good of another, are truly shocking. If the model for offering these is a member of a group those in need of help are trying to exclude, then grace and love, as Jesus tells it, know no boundaries.

C. Who, then, was the neighbor? Jesus returns to the question game after telling his shocking story and the scholar, though he got it right—the one who showed mercy—kept dancing; he couldn't bear to say the name "Samaritan." And then the skewering directive: "Go and do likewise." The question

really moves from, “Who is my neighbor?” to, “Am I willing to be a neighbor to anyone whose need I see that God has put me in a position to meet, regardless of race, class, gender, or any other distinction I might want to use to try to justify myself?” The scholar started confident but ended up uncomfortable. That’s what this parable does to us, if we hear it rightly. Who our neighbor is just might be very unsettling.

D. It’s also worth pondering for a moment about what made the Samaritan “good?” The word is actually never used in the parable, but we see his goodness in a variety of ways. He didn’t ask this man’s political affiliation, nor did he check out his nationality. If he did, it obviously didn’t matter. He was willing to incur the cost of this man’s ongoing needs. He was willing to take the risk of the police coming along and, seeing him of different color bent over the man, be accused of being the bad guy. Grace and love are costly; they often require risk. How do we get to that place where we’re willing?

III. The Road of Grace and Love

A. Last fall, when I heard Dr. Melkonian (“Ruth,” who sits in the balcony with her family, to most of us), speak on this text in chapel at Gordon College, she had us play the “would you rather” game. Would you rather be a cat or a mouse? Would you rather live without an elbow or a knee? Would you rather be the Samaritan or the mugged man? Perhaps, she suggested, we need to be both. That is, if we’re going to be the neighbor, if we’re going to be healers, if we’re going to bear the cost of offering grace and love we need to first marinate in what Jesus spent on us, we need to be healed, we need to receive grace and love, we need to find ourselves in that ditch with no hope until Jesus comes along.

B. Indeed, it’s worth observing that the road on which all this was taking place is the same road Jesus would travel shortly on his last trip up to Jerusalem where he would give his life in grace and love for the world. Israel’s God, Jesus would personify, is the God of grace and love for all. Have we received the healing Jesus has come to offer? Jesus knew that the scholar had not, and he wanted to expand his horizon. The scholar wanted to know, remember, what he had to do to inherit eternal life. He wanted to know what rules he had to obey to become acceptable to God. And this is the nub of the issue. If we think we are going to be saved by our obedience, we will constantly be trying to justify ourselves, we will always be trying to limit the scope and application of God’s law in order to make it more manageable for us to keep.

C. But if we can receive the grace and love that Jesus has come to bring, then we can know we are already acceptable to God before we have obeyed a thing. We will follow God’s law, not out of fearful compliance, but out of joyful response. We will not ask how small our neighbor pool can be, but how large we can make it so that more and more very different kinds of people can experience the grace and love that we have. We will walk alongside those who have been marginalized or abused. We will want to care for those of different background and belief. We will seek to be places of refuge for those without home or community. We will make sure that prejudice in any form cannot be tolerated. Will it make us uncomfortable? Probably, but if we can learn more and more to receive grace, then we will become more and more comfortable walking in it and offering it to others.

Who was the good neighbor? The one who showed mercy. The one who ministered grace and love. May we go and do likewise.