

The morning after Amy and I moved into our student apartment at Columbia Seminary, I stumbled out of bed and into the kitchen to pour myself a cup of coffee. I'm certain I was unshaven with an amazing case of bedhead, wearing a rumpled T-shirt and the gym shorts I had slept in the night before. I flopped down at the table and looked out the sliding glass door to the back patio. And only a few yards away, on her back patio, stood a woman watering her plants, and she was looking right at me. Oh great, I thought. There's my new neighbor.

She smiled sheepishly and gave a little wave, I faked a smile and waved back. That afternoon, I made a trip to the store for some Venetian blinds.

Incidentally, that woman on her patio turned out to be Jill Tolbert, whose husband is the Reverend Joel Tolbert, pastor of the Oconee Presbyterian Church in Watkinsville, so all these years later, we are neighbors yet again.

Who is my neighbor? I imagine most of us immediately think of the people next door, or across the street, or over the back fence. Our natural inclination is to answer that question in terms of geographic or demographic proximity to ourselves.

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.

We have come to know this short story that Jesus tells as the parable of the Good Samaritan. But if you know anything about biblical history, you know that the term "Good Samaritan" was an oxymoron. Samaritans and Jews did not associate with each other. Samaritans were viewed by Jews as half-breeds and sell-outs, a dispute that stretched back nearly 800 years.

So, Jesus turns to this young expert in Jewish law, and he says to him, "Which of these three, do you think, was

a neighbor to the one who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

The attorney, clearly flabbergasted at the thought of a Samaritan being capable of such righteousness, couldn't bring himself to even say the word Samaritan. He simply replied, “The one who showed him mercy.”

To which Jesus responded, “Go and do likewise.”

Who is my neighbor? the lawyer asked, wanting Jesus to define the boundaries of the neighborhood. Your neighbor, says Jesus, is anyone who is in need at life's roadside. Your neighbor is neither black nor white. Your neighbor is neither Christian nor Muslim. Your neighbor is neither liberal nor conservative. Your neighbor is any needy person you may come across on one of the many Jericho roads of life.

About a half-century ago, a wise preacher from Georgia said this:

We see [people] as Jews or Gentiles, Catholics or Protestants, Chinese or American, Negroes or whites. We fail to think of them as fellow human beings made from the same basic stuff as we, molded in the same divine image. The priest and the Levite saw only a

bleeding body, not a human being like themselves. But the Good Samaritan will always remind us to remove the cataracts of provincialism from our spiritual eyes and see [people] as [people]...The good neighbor looks beyond the external accidents and discerns those inner qualities that make all [people] human, and therefore, brothers [and sisters].¹

But perhaps we're being too hard on the priest and Levite.

Perhaps the priest and the Levite were concerned about their personal security. After all, the robbers who accosted the man on the road could still be hiding nearby, waiting for another victim.

Perhaps there were religious concerns to attend to. Touching a bleeding body could make one ritually unclean and unfit for priestly duty until ritual purification could be performed.

Or perhaps they were late for a meeting of the Jericho Road Improvement Association and thought their efforts and expertise could be better served at addressing the root causes of the problem rather than attending to the needs of this one unfortunate individual.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr, “On Being a Good Neighbor,” in *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 33. Dr.

King's thinking on this passage deeply shaped my approach to this text. I edited the quotation to reflect inclusive language.

In any case, their thought process was this: “What might happen to me if I stop?” It’s a perfectly natural inclination, born out of an innate sense of self-preservation common to all creatures.

But the good neighbor rises above his base animal fears and reverses the question. He asks, “What might happen to him if I don’t stop?”

How often do we face the same dilemma!

“If I speak up about this issue, if I take a stand on this, what might happen to me? Might I lose my job? Might I lose my friendships and social connections? Might I be verbally or even physically assaulted?”

But good neighbors always reverse the question. “If I don’t speak up about this issue, if I don’t take a stand on this, what might happen to them?”

Oscar Schindler rescued hundreds of Jews certain annihilation at the hands of the Nazis. His question was not, “What might happen to my personal fortune, or even my life, if I protect these people?” It was, “What might happen to them if I don’t?”

In the summer of 2016, during a peaceful march in downtown Dallas, Texas, when gunfire suddenly erupted, the courageous men and women of the Dallas Police Department didn’t stop to

ask, “What might happen to me if I go running toward this threat?” They reversed the question, asking, “What might happen to all of these people down here if I don’t?” Good neighbors always reverse the question.

I’d like to think that I’m a good neighbor. I want to be the Good Samaritan in the story. But too often in my life, I’ve crossed to the other side and passed on by.

There was the time when I was a young seminary intern, brand new to the ministry, when standing in the door of the church after Sunday service, a couple said to me with a wink and a nod, “You know, this neighborhood used to be different before all the blacks moved in.” I was stunned, and I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing.

And to be honest, I was wondering what might happen to me if I said something. I was wondering if my supervising pastor would chastise me. I was wondering if I would get labeled as a radical, or worse. So I just put my head down and passed by on the other side.

Or the time I was in the barber shop, and the funeral for the wife of that Georgia preacher was on the television screen, and the barber said to me, with a wink and a nod, “You know them blacks and their funerals. They just go on and on and on.” I didn’t know what to say, and I was afraid that I might anger the barber if I said anything, so I just kept

my head down and passed by on the other side.

And I could give example after example of when I've succumbed to fear, hidden behind my privilege, and failed to be a good neighbor.

And I suspect that you've experienced the same. I suspect that you really want to be like the Good Samaritan. You want to be the one who stands up for what's right, the one who sees past the accidents of race and gender and station, who sees the image of the Most High God in every face you meet. But when the chips are down, when the moment of truth arrives, the temptation to put our heads down, keep our mouths shut, and cross to the other side is so incredibly great. So wide is the gate and easy is the path that leads to the other side of the Jericho Road.

But that old Georgia preacher invites us to go through the narrow gate and up the difficult path of justice and mercy and kindness. He writes:

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.²

Who is my neighbor?

He is a part of me and I am a part of him.

She is a part of me, and I am a part of her.

They are a part of us, and we are a part of them.

I've been told that First Presbyterian Church is a purple church. Somewhere along the way, someone decided that Democrats are "blue" and Republicans are "red," and when you mix blue and red together, you get purple.

This is an exceedingly difficult time to be a purple church. As a nation, we are becoming more polarized by the day, and we are rapidly losing the ability to have conversations about difficult subjects without resorting to ad hominem attacks, tribalism, or just plain meanness. And so, there's a temptation, I think, in purple churches to just avoid certain subjects altogether.

Because what might happen to us if we really had an honest conversation about race and power and privilege and the ways in which these invisible forces shape daily life for all of us?

² Ibid, 38.

What might happen to us if we really had an honest conversation about pro-life issues, not just about conception and pregnancy, but also about the access to healthcare and education, gun violence prevention, and capital punishment?

What might happen? Would people get mad? Would they cut their financial support, or just up and leave? Would our purple church turn more red, or more blue, or would it disintegrate altogether? Those are honest questions, born out of a natural sense of self-preservation.

But perhaps Jesus invites us to a different conversation. Perhaps Jesus invites us to ask, “What will happen to our church and our community if we *don’t* have these conversations?”

If we won’t have these kinds of conversations, if we won’t model for the world what it looks like to disagree with our neighbor and still love them all at the same time, then who will? If we won’t have these conversations in here, as the body of Christ, how can we possibly have them out there in the world? And if we won’t have these conversations now, what sort of world will we leave to our children and grandchildren?”

Who is my neighbor? the lawyer asks Jesus. What are the limits of my responsibility toward them?

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.

The world in which we live and move and have our being doesn’t seem to have much interest in mercy these days. We seem to be drawing in on ourselves by the day, just itching for a fight. The motto these days seems to be strike first, strike fast, strike hard.

So it’s up to us, it’s up to the Church, the people called forth as the body of Christ, to present an alternative Word to the world.

It’s up to us, the Church, the people called forth in the world to be the light that shines in the darkness, to model neighborliness to the world.

We cannot afford to put our heads down and cross to the other side. We cannot ignore the wounded ones on the Jericho roads of this life, because they are us, and we are them.