

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
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Luke 10:25-37

There Goes the Neighborhood

“And who is my neighbor?”

That question hangs in the air over our nation this week.

The lawyer was trying to test Jesus. He asked him, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” After Jesus prompted him about what he read in the Law, the lawyer correctly responded, “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.” That appeal to Scripture was not good enough for this lawyer. He was seeking to justify himself, to trip Jesus up in his interpretation of the Scripture. How Jesus responded to this next question would determine who would win this verbal exchange. The lawyer didn’t know it, but the stakes were actually much higher than that. It was more than his pride on the line here. It was more than this little incident of mental jousting that was riding on the answer Jesus gave to this unnamed lawyer’s next question. The way Jesus answered the question would change the course of the history of the world.

The question: “And who is my neighbor?”

It’s a great question. It’s the kind of question a lawyer would ask, right? Let’s define our terms. Let’s be clear about who I am supposed to love. God, I understand. That’s the easy part. But, “love your neighbor as yourself?” Who are we talking about here? Is it the guy who lives next door? Is it the guy who lives in the next village over? Exactly how far from my domicile is my love supposed to extend? Please, be clear.

I said that the way Jesus answered that question would change the course of the history of the world because when he told the story of the man who had fallen among robbers he made the hero a Samaritan. Not the priest. Not the Levite. A Samaritan. Jesus told the lawyer that his neighbor is a foreigner—from a different country, someone who practices a different religion than him—basically a bastardized version of his religion, someone who doesn't look like him, someone who doesn't act like him, someone who doesn't think like him. He couldn't have chosen a more different, more *other* person to tell a story about. Not only was the Samaritan so completely other, he was a member of a reviled race. Samaritans would have been mistrusted. People would have told jokes about them. They were considered unclean. No one would have wanted to have anything to do with them. Yet who is it who shows compassion? Who is it who was moved with pity? Who is it who shows love in this situation? Who acts in a neighborly way? Who am I supposed to love? Who is my neighbor?

My neighbor is the black man. My neighbor is the police officer. My neighbor is the Muslim. My neighbor is the undocumented immigrant. My neighbor is the refugee. My neighbor is the member of the other political party.

Jesus changed history because he challenged his followers to see beyond all the usual ways that we define who is my neighbor. No longer would it be just those people who are like me. All the usual boundaries that separate us—kinship, tribalism, ethnicity, language, religion, race, nationality... as well as social status, economic circumstances, education level, political affiliation—all these things in the kingdom of God are meaningless.

Any time we see the world as us against them, we're missing something. I'm not saying that we don't have legitimate enemies, or that we should be lax about security. But the events of this past week have heightened the sense of fear and of otherness that has already existed in this

country. The back-to-back shootings of two black men by police and the videos which were available online certainly highlighted ongoing problems within our society. Then the shooting of police in Dallas by a man who said he wanted kill white people added to the tension and the fear. Our tendency when we are stressed is to circle the wagons, depend on those closest to us, and to shut out those of whom we are suspicious and fearful. If we are not careful, hate has a way of seeping in. It enters through fissures in fearful hearts. It is heated up by anger, even righteous anger. It boils over with conflict and violent rhetoric. Hate's volatile fumes can fill the air around us so that the smallest spark will set it off, and in the resulting conflagration we all get burned.

Two weeks ago we heard St. Paul say to the Galatians, "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another." We need to stop biting and devouring each other in this country. Or we will be consumed. Christians must lead the effort. We must move beyond the rhetoric, the vitriol, and all the attempts to pit one group against another. We need to stand with victims. We need to stand for justice. If there is systemic racism in our law enforcement community, we need to confront it and fix it. If there are radical forces who would threaten violence against those who risk their lives every day to serve and protect, we need to oppose them and show our support for the police. No problems will be solved by setting up battle lines and sniping at one another. Neither will any problems be solved by pretending that problems don't exist. Those of us who follow the man who caused us to think twice about who is my neighbor need to lead, with our prayers, our voices, our votes, our actions. We need to be the example of what it means to love our neighbor, to love selflessly, to love in radical and dangerous ways.

Jesus taught us that the only antidote for hate is love; the only way to combat violence is to stand for peace; the only answer for those who would draw lines of otherness to separate us, to alienate us, to foster fear and anger between us is to see the other as one whom Jesus loved so much that he was willing to lay down his life. Of course, to see the world this way comes with a price. To identify with the reviled in this world always puts you in danger of being hated yourself. It's a difficult place to be, but it's the only way to change the course of history.

Amen