

“Neighborly Love”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
First Sunday in Lent
Edina Morningside Community Church; February 21, 2021

Luke 10:25-42

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

I read recently about an [innovative shared ministry](#) in the Bay Area of California. You’ve probably heard how expensive housing has gotten there, so much so that thousands of ordinary working people have started living out of their cars because they cannot afford rent. It’s better than living entirely on the street, but there’s no ready access to bathrooms, and sleeping overnight in cars is usually against the rules, so can lead to tickets and fines. Responding to the urgent need, a group of faith communities and a community college banded together to create something called the Rotating Safe Car Park. For one month at each location, their parking lots become a safe place to sleep at night, and their facilities offer the chance to go to the bathroom, charge phones, and on occasion get a little food. Program organizers and pastors lobbied to change city code to allow the practice, participants are referred through social service agencies, and each hosting congregation offers hospitality through volunteers. It has fostered more ecumenical and interfaith collaboration among host organizations, and offers meaningful short-term help to those who are literally by the side of the road with nowhere to go.

Most of us could probably tell the story of Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan, but as we read it again and try to imagine it in a first-century Jewish context, we might discover some surprising elements. First, note that Jesus tells the parable in response to the lawyer, who correctly summarizes the laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy about love for God and neighbor. But Robert Williamson, Jr. [points out](#) that when the lawyer goes on further to ask “who is my neighbor”, he also wants to know the opposite: “Who is *not* my neighbor? Who do I *not* have to love?” In response, Jesus tells a parable about the presumptions of the day—who’s in and who’s out. The three would-be rescuers in Jesus’ parable are so well known to us that we could miss the shock here. Israelite communities of Jesus’ time were divided into three parts: priests, Levites, and Israelites. So everyone in Jesus’ audience would have grown up hearing stories about those three, and they would certainly have expected the

third passerby to be an Israelite. Rabbi Amy Jill Levine [says](#) that “To go from priest to Levite to the fellow who stops, who was a Samaritan, is like going from Larry to Mo to Osama bin Laden... It’s unthinkable.” Furthermore, when most of us now hear the parable of the Good Samaritan, we tend to identify with the Samaritan, as the hero of Jesus’ story. But another commentator suggests that “No self-respecting Jew, poor, rich or otherwise would even consider imagining themselves to be the person who represents their enemy.” Instead, Jesus’ original hearers would have more likely identified with “the beaten-up man who, like themselves, would have been poor” and who “lived a life that was always threatened”.¹ They may even have known people who had suffered just this sort of highway robbery. So here Jesus is telling a story where the lawyer (and everyone within earshot of Jesus) recognizes themselves as the vulnerable character in need of help, which comes in generous, caring form from the Samaritan, the enemy. “Do you have the grace to allow your enemy to tend you?” asks one writer. “The one who you thought was your enemy could one day be your salvation.”² Jesus’ parable is about showing mercy to those who are in need, but it’s also about allowing ourselves to *receive* mercy. Such mutual vulnerability breaks down the division between rescuers and victims, the assumptions that turn neighbors into strangers or enemies in the first place. Can I hear Jesus’ call to receive and extend neighborly love among supposed strangers or enemies in our own day? Will I risk vulnerable proximity with those who voted differently from me, those with whom I disagree about Covid precautions and vaccines, or those whose life choices I presume to know and judge?

Being in service with people unlike ourselves can dissolve assumptions about strangers, as those involved in the Rotating Safe Car Park can attest. Episcopal priest Jani Wild said that when her church considered the program, they initially had reservations about helping people sleeping in their cars. She [said](#), “There’s worry about the other person. There’s worry that they’re going to be disruptive, they’re going to be messy, they’re going to smell, and the facilities will get trashed. None of that happened, and none of that has happened at any of the churches.” Instead, “Parishioners realized that often the only difference between them and the guests—who include college students, Uber drivers, and other local employees whose jobs don’t pay enough to meet the high cost of living—was one missed paycheck or one medical emergency.” This mutuality with those who were previously regarded as “stranger” or “other” leads to relationships, and care for one another that goes beyond charity. Program director Norman Puck says that “After a while, we’re just supposed to have coffee, but then they realize so-and-so needs clothes, so those are coming in. Then they realize so-and-so needs a sleeping bag, so they’re bringing that in. The advantage is you’re connecting and truly welcoming your neighbor and giving them love on a very personal level. Now it’s a very personal connection.” The Christian community that recognizes ourselves in Jesus’ parable sees another not as a stranger to be welcomed with aloof pity, but as kin who loves and is loved in return.

This movement from judging the stranger to recognizing oneself in the neighbor, then extends further to changing systems in ways that help everyone. Participants in the Rotating Safe Car Park know that the real answers for homelessness involve building more affordable housing and addressing wealth disparities. Their ministry of mercy and proximity helps them realize the need for such changes, and then it gives the conviction and power necessary to do so. Sarah Pearson, pastor of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church that founded the program, says that “I can give people food any day

¹ Spill the Beans, Worship and Learning Resources, Issue 22, Copyright © 2017, spillbeans.org.uk.

² Spill the Beans.

of the week, but changing the law to benefit them, changing the system is so hard and so slow.” Yet “When you’re standing up in city hall and you’re making shifts in the law for the sake of justice—that’s what I believe my call as pastor is.”

Welcome, service, and justice—these are the fruits of the neighborly love Jesus commands. I’m proud of how we capture this in the national statements of the United Church of Christ. “Our Purpose is to Love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves. Our Vision is that we are United in Christ’s love and seek to make a just world for all. And our Mission is that United in the Spirit and inspired by God’s grace, we welcome all, love all, and seek justice for all.” This is how we start to live out Jesus’ parable of neighborly love today, and it helps to guide all our ministries with neighbor, children and creation here at Edina Morningside Community Church. Thank you for your willingness to be the hands and feet of Jesus in our own day, in neighborly closeness that shows welcome, love and justice for all.

Let me close with an exhortation by Lin Manuel Miranda. In his 2016 Tony Award acceptance speech for Hamilton, Miranda said, “We live through times when hate and fear seem stronger. We rise and fall and light from dying embers, remembrances that hope and love last longer. And love, is love, is love, is love, is love, is love, is love, cannot be killed or swept aside. Now, fill the world, with music, love, and pride.” Amen.