

“WHO’S MY NEIGHBOR?”**Rev. Becky Stephens**

Text: Luke 10:25-37 NLT

God’s Word: Colossians 1:1-14 NLT

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²⁵ One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: “Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ Jesus replied, “What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?” ²⁷ The man answered, “‘You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.’ And, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” ²⁸ “Right!” Jesus told him. “Do this and you will live!” ²⁹ The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

³⁰ Jesus replied with a story: “A Jewish man was traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road. ³¹ “By chance a priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. ³² A Temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side. ³³ “Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. ³⁴ Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, ‘Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I’ll pay you the next time I’m here.’”

³⁶ “Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?” Jesus asked. ³⁷ The man replied, “The one who showed him mercy.” Then Jesus said, “Yes, now go and do the same.”

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It was an ordinary day of commuting for Cameron Roberts. The 20 year-old law school student made his way down the steps into a New York Subway Station to wait for the train. All of a sudden, something went horribly wrong in the young man’s brain, sending him into a violent seizure. Roberts fell to the ground, got back up again, and started stumbling along the edge of the subway platform.

Moments later, he was in-between the tracks on the railway bed, just as the rumbling of an oncoming train started shaking the station. Some of the people in the subway turned away

with their eyes clenched shut against the horror of what was about to happen. Other commuters stood frozen in a sense of utter helplessness. Others were in such a hurry to get to where they needed to go, that they missed the moment altogether. In mere seconds, a young man, with his entire life ahead of him, would meet an unthinkably violent end, and no one could stop it. No one would stop it.

Except the one man who did. A 50 year-old construction worker named Hector Calero did the unthinkable. This middle aged undocumented worker from Mexico, who had very little in common with a white upper middle class law student, chose to do what no one else at that scene decided to do: he chose to cross over. Calero ran across that subway platform, jumped down onto the tracks and covered the young man's convulsing body with his own. He held him against the ground while the subway train thundered over them.

Later, when he was interviewed about the incident, Calero said: "I don't feel like I did something spectacular; I just saw someone who needed help. I did what I felt was right. We're supposed to come to people's rescue."

There's something about that story that's both inspiring and convicting. It's kind of like there is a Law of Love—a Law of profound regard for others which, if we could all live by it, would make this world a very different place than it is.

Don't we all hunger for a better world? Don't we all yearn to know the part we can play in moving toward it?

In this sense, perhaps we're all a little like the man who asked Jesus a question in our Gospel Lesson for today.

*"Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replied, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" The man answered, "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 Love your neighbor as yourself."*

*"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." But then the man took it a bit further. He asked, "And who is my neighbor?"*

In other words, "We have so many enemies. And there is so much hatred between different races, religions, political parties and so forth. Is my neighbor just the person who lives next door, and whose kids play with my kids? Or is my neighbor just someone who looks and thinks like me? Does someone have to live in the same country as I do to be my neighbor? Are there any limits on this loving your neighbor thing?"

I mean, I can relate to this guy. How about you? He wants to do the right thing, but he is part of this broken world. He's like one of those commuters standing on the subway platform. He's like me. Perhaps he's like you.

If someone came up to you and asked: "How would you like it if love were the motivating force in your life?" Would you reply: "Sign me up!!!" But, then, would a second impulse move within you that asks: "But what would that really mean in practice? What would it cost me? Surely you're not talking about jumping in front of a train for a stranger or something crazy like that! There have to be some boundaries to what I would be required to do. I mean, I like the Law of Love—just as long as it's coupled with the Law of Limits. So tell me: Who's my neighbor?"

And so Jesus goes on to tell a story about a man on a journey who is mugged, beat up and left for dead on the side of a road. And the first two people who happen along this poor guy are both of the same race and religion as the half dead dude in the ditch. They are even religious people. They've read the Law of Love as it's written on paper a hundred, maybe a thousand times. They may even think they live by it. But they are in a hurry. And they don't have time to deal with this guy. Also, it would take money to get him to a place where he could be nursed back to health. Better to just leave the helping to someone else.

So they pass by on the other side and put the whole situation out of their mind. They might feel a little guilty for a couple of minutes, but by the time they've gone around a bend or two in the road they have forgotten all about the man in the ditch. I can relate to this? How about you?

But a Samaritan guy comes along. And he's of a different race and religion than the man in the ditch. And neither race of people like one another. As a matter of fact, they are taught to hate each other. They are taught to think of the other as "less than human." But that doesn't stop this Samaritan guy from crossing over.

He bandaged the other guy's wounds, pouring his own [expensive] oil and wine [on him]. Then he put the guy on his own donkey, and took him to a place where he could be taken care of. He went way out of his way and probably missed whatever meeting he had been headed to. He spent his own money for the guy to stay in the inn, and even promised to pay the innkeeper for any extra expense—even though he probably wasn't particularly wealthy himself.

Jesus is so honest in this parable about how expensive compassion can be. We often talk so sentimentally or idealistically about compassion and love. But when we really get close to those who are hurting, it almost always costs us something—whether it be time, money, emotional energy or all of the above. Working with other people's wounds is messy business.

Investing in people who are in pain knocks us off our normal schedule. It is usually not convenient. It might tangle us up for a long time.

In other words, crossing over to help requires that we deny ourselves a bit. To do what the man on the subway did or the Good Samaritan means we must die to self. It means we must walk the way of Jesus. Jesus isn't telling a simple moralistic story here. He's actually telling us about the heart of God and what He Himself is doing for us. I mean, think about it.

Jesus is the Ultimate Good Samaritan!!! We are all in the ditch of brokenness, poverty and despair. We have all been mugged and robbed of our true humanity. We are all lying on the road half-dead and well on our way to the grave.

And God didn't have to come rescue us. He could have very rightly set a limit on how much He would do for us. But Jesus shows us that the Law of Love is much bigger than the Law of Limits. God has made the decision to "cross over." He didn't pass on by. He jumped down onto the tracks, threw His body over the world, and offered us a love without limits.

That road to Jericho that Jesus describes in the parable of the Good Samaritan is the road to Calvary; it's the way to the Cross!!! In all reality, that ditch from Jerusalem to Jericho is a huge one and it's filled to overflowing with human suffering.

Can you see the spouse, the child, the friend, the relative, the coworker, the homeless man or woman, the Arab, the black person, the Mexican, the Puerto Rican, the stranger in pain? Can you hear their groans?

Human pain is so horrible that many of us have learned to close our ears to it. We feel so helpless sometimes, that we can't imagine what we could do to make a difference. We are in such a hurry, and our hearts are often so hard. It's natural for us to make excuses and simply "pass by on the other side."

But that's not the way I want to live my life. How about you? I want to seek the power and grace to overcome all of that and find a way to let love move me to do something, even if it's costly.

Let us pray: Dear God, I want to be ruled by Your love, not by a sense of limits. Help me to choose to move toward the pain of others, rather than around it. Help me to walk the Way of Jesus. I can't do it on my own. Lord, I want to live—to really live. I want to love You with all my heart and with all my soul and with all my strength and with all my mind, and I want to love my neighbor as myself. I give my time, my talents, my money over to You. Do with me what You will. I trust you with my life. I am Yours. You are mine. So be it. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.