

“Who is my neighbor?” The theme for our worship today talks about “Followers loving their neighbor.” So who is my neighbor and what does it really mean to be a neighbor? If you asked 100 American families who their neighbor is, the survey might bring back some interesting and maybe not so favorable responses. Survey says, “The person I casually wave at when I get the mail but never really talk to.” “The one who knocks on my door to borrow stuff.” “The person whose lawn always looks better than mine” or the opposite, “the person who never cuts their grass.” “The guy who blares his music while I’m trying to relax.” Maybe about the best example is the most famous American neighbor of all. “Heidi Ho! Good neighbor...!” the famous greeting of Wilson Wilson, the wise old sage who offered advice from the other side of the fence, but never, no not ever revealed his full face!

“Who is my neighbor?” And “what does it mean to be a neighbor?” These are questions that come straight out of our text today. The first question is asked by a man who is more similar to us than we might like to admit. The second question gets at the heart of the matter Jesus is trying to focus that man in on. To lead the man to the answers, we see Jesus the Master Teacher use one the most well-known parables in the whole Bible, the parable of the Good Samaritan. The plot gets pretty incredible. We see a **perfect stranger who loves like a neighbor**. So let’s look at those two questions and how this whole situation comes about.

“An expert in the law” stands up to test Jesus. Now this certainly wasn’t the only time. These guys were always trying to trap Jesus into saying something wrong. “Teacher, teacher, is it right to pay taxes to Caesar? Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” “Teacher, teacher, if a woman’s husband dies 7 times in a row, who will she be married to in heaven?” On this occasion at least the expert asks the question that gets right down to the point! **“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”** But even just the question itself betrays a misplaced sense of where the burden lies. **“WHAT MUST I DO?”** He might as well have said, “God, why don’t you give me an easy checklist of what all you want me to do, and I’ll be sure to have it done by Friday before the weekend! Sound good? Okay!! That’s the kind of checklist our hearts like isn’t it? Sitting in church this week! Check! Got an envelope ready for the offering plate. Check! I didn’t yell at my wife this week! Check! We want security we can manufacture.

Jesus was used to the kind of thing these guys were up to, so he usually answered their questions with a question of his own. Well Mr. Expert in the Law, you tell me! **“What is written in the law? How do you read it?”** This really was sort of a cupcake question for an esteemed expert in the law, so at least he knocks this answer out of the park. **“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!”** These were the kind of passages God had told them to paint on their doorframes and to talk about at home and when they lie down and get up. This expert probably would have recited these words every single morning and evening in his prayers.

Jesus commends him for his answer! **“You have answered correctly!”** Bingo! You got it. This is even the same answer Jesus himself gives the teachers of the law on another occasion. **“Do this and you will live!”** Jesus says. And he certainly wasn’t lying. You will get to heaven if you do this perfectly. Pretty simple task right? “Love God with your WHOLE heart, WHOLE soul, WHOLE mind and ALL your strength.” The real checklist of God’s demands and how we measure up should send us all scrambling for the door in guilt and embarrassment. There is not a single thing on the list of God’s law that you or I can actually check off and say, “This we have done perfectly.”

But sometimes even the law doesn’t always work to blast through the shell of our hard headed hearts. We still have the gall to stand up to test Jesus as if we had a chance. “But look at this! Doesn’t this count for something??” I love God when others are watching! I love my neighbor usually, at least when it’s to his face. Yeah, so, sometimes I get a little bent out of shape but God’s not going to stick it to me for that. These are not such hard commands to keep. I’d say I do pretty well for myself.

In our sinful nature, we’re not so different from that expert, trying to make it on our own. We are told he asked another question because he was looking to justify himself. **“And who is my neighbor?”** Now there’s two ways to think about that. Either this expert was a little embarrassed because he asked such a simple question, so now he wanted to point out that the law doesn’t specifically define what a neighbor is. Or, he was looking to justify his life by finding out just exactly who the select few were who actually qualified as his neighbor. Then he could confirm on his list. “Yes I’ve loved him, him, and her too. I’m good to go! Eternal life here I come!”

Do you hear that voice in your head...? That little voice always looking to justify or rationalize what you’ve done. We’re always looking for the exact definition of what we are supposed to do because we wouldn’t dare do anything extra. We’d rather define who our neighbor **isn’t** than show love to the people we meet. We’d rather look at our life and say, “Well, I guess I’ve done enough to pass,” than recognize the continual debt of love that we owe to one another.

Jesus recognizes that this man needs to have his perception changed and so he takes the opportunity to teach him just exactly who his neighbor is. **“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.”** I can tell you from experience that is steep, rocky, and mountainous terrain, the perfect place for robbers and bandits to hide out. So the man is mugged and left for dead on the side of the road. Of all the people to come along, except maybe a doctor, who better to come along than a priest! SURELY, he will have mercy. He will help his fellow Jewish countrymen. But now wait! A priest has a lot to think about. What if while he’s helping him, the man dies? Then the priest would be unclean for seven days and he’d have to do the cleansing rituals and what a hassle! Whatever the reason was, the priest sees the helpless man and passes by on the other side!

Then a Levite comes, one of the men who serves in the temple. Surely he will help! He’s used to a life of service. But oh man, if he helps, then he’s got to carry this guy all the way down the road or maybe the robbers were still laying in

wait or maybe he just had a meeting to get to and didn't have time for a stop. Whatever it was, the Levite too passes by. **Then comes a Samaritan traveler.** Samaritans and Jews were notorious enemies. The Jews looked down their nose at these Samaritan half-breeds with their strange mix of beliefs and the Samaritans returned the favor. No love lost between them! There's no chance this guy stops! It's like expecting a Viking to help a Packer up off the field or vice versa.

But the Samaritan has pity on the man. He goes over to him, pours his own oil and wine on the man to clean the wounds and bandages him. Then he puts him on his own donkey and takes the hike himself, leading him down to an inn. Surely this stranger, this foreigner, this Samaritan has already done his duty. He's rescued him, he got him to safety. His job is done. But the Samaritan takes care of the man through the night. Then the next day he gives the innkeeper two days' wages of his own money to take care of the man and tells him to put anything else he needs on his own tab. This is far over and above a normal courtesy. **This is a perfect stranger showing up out of the blue and showing the love of a neighbor** to a man who needs it.

So Jesus brings it to a close with the final question, "Which of these was a neighbor to the man?" The answer is so clear from the parable! Of course, **"the one who had mercy on the man."** He can hardly get it wrong. Notice, though, that the expert can't even bring himself to say, "the Samaritan." That would not have been his answer to begin with. Before the parable, there's no chance a Jewish expert would have considered a Samaritan his neighbor. The priest and the Levite definitely were neighbors, countrymen, brothers, but not the Samaritan. But when the neighbors pass by, **the perfect stranger loves like a neighbor!**

So Jesus teaches us what it truly means to be a neighbor! It's the person who shows love, who sees a need and meets it. It's not some lame definition like the person who lives on the other side of the fence, or the person who shares my heritage. A neighbor is anyone I come across and the question isn't, "Who is my neighbor?" The question is, "To whom can I be a neighbor? Who can I show love to? And the real answer is, "Who can't I show love to?" Everyone needs it! Especially the people I would usually look down my nose at. Especially people that in my selfishness I wouldn't normally touch with a ten-foot pole.

So what is it that overcomes my selfishness, my self-righteousness, my lovelessness? What is it that transforms me from the loveless Levite to the selfless Samaritan? It's the realization that you and I were poor miserable sinners lying, not half dead, but dead as a doornail on the side of the road, bruised and broken by the devil and all his evil marauders. As God came upon us wretched sinners, he had every right to pass by us and say, "To hell with you all. You're getting what you deserve!" That judgement would have been just and right for our sin.

But at great personal cost to himself, our heavenly Father had compassion on us. He gave us his heart! He sent his own Son across the gulf that separates God from man and he dealt mercifully with us in our sin. The Son of God lived **perfectly** among us as a **stranger** to his own. He stooped down to help us and shed his blood to cleanse our sin-stricken bodies. He bandaged our wounds and truly **by his**

wounds, we are healed! He lifted us up and brought us back to life and if all that wasn't enough he paid the price of his own life to take care for us forever. This is God's Son the **truly perfect stranger** who showed **the ultimate love of a neighbor.** When I consider how desperate my condition was, and all that my God has done for me—truly, he has done everything for me to inherit eternal life, there is nothing left for me to do—then my only response is, "How can I love you Lord, with my whole being?"

I can love him and thank him by doing what he asks. I can thank him by loving him alone above all other loves in my heart. I can thank him by showing love to my neighbor, whomever I may encounter, in whatever way I can help. The recent storms have left a lot of people hurting and have provided us a great opportunity. The damage and cleanup have mostly subsided, but some are left with so much to rebuild! Is there something the person who physically lives next door to you needs? Is there help you can offer to your neighbors in your community? Maybe it just takes walking across the street to ask.

Recently, I was walking with a pastor from another congregation. Pastor and Pastor-elect...that's about as close as you get to a Priest and Levite. We came upon a man on the street in downtown Appleton named Stormin' Norman. He was scruffy and rough and he was in a wheelchair because he had lost his leg. I noticed him from a distance first and thankfully, the pastor I was with turned and started walking toward him, or my loveless feet may have carried me right on by as I waived. Like the Levite, I had a meeting to get to.

But there by the side of road, I watched and listened as the other pastor shared God's Word with Stormin' Norman, not like a priest and a Levite, but like one beggar holding out bread to another. Norman was our neighbor. He needed Jesus and he needed a neighbor to share it with him. The opportunities are all around us if we only open our eyes. We have neighbors everywhere. Share with them your love, the love shown to you in Christ. Share with them the things God has blessed you with. Even if they're perfect strangers to you, **be a stranger who loves like a neighbor.** Then as their neighbor, share with them of all that God has done for you. Amen!

Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, ²¹ equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.