

Sermon – Luke 10:25-37
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Grace Lutheran Church
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“Like a Good Neighbor”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. It's a story made for cinema. You can almost see it. The opening shot slowly focusing on a man, left for dead in the desert. The almost-blinding visual suddenly flashes back to the night before, when the man, minding his own business on the road, is suddenly set upon by bandits. Light and dark, the scenes keep flashing back and forth. Under the bright sun, a priest approaches. Surely this religious man will help. But the violence of his indifference is juxtaposed with the violence of the bandits. Back and forth. So, too, does a Levite approach. Hope is born anew! But the camera follows the Levite as he turns up his nose and walks on by. After another shot of the violence in the night, the camera picks out a new figure in the daytime. As viewers, we wonder if hope is finally coming. Who can it be? *It's a bird. It's a plane. It's . . .* the Good Samaritan!
2. I've been busy this weekend, so I have yet to see the new Superman movie, although it seems that new Superman movies come out at about the same frequency as the parable of the Good Samaritan appears in cycle of readings for Sunday worship. And while the Samaritan doesn't have a big “S” on his chest, he has come to be the biblical character who represents the heroism of basic human decency and kindness. So much so that, in a world of decreasing biblical literacy, people know what you mean when you call someone a “Good Samaritan.”

3. Read too simplistically, however, we run the risk of imagining that this is a simple morality play or, worse, a straightforward answer to the lawyer's question. What must we do to inherit eternal life? Well, be like that fine Samaritan fellow, of course! If this is where our reading begins and ends, we've missed the point. The first thing to do when reading a parable is to ask, Where is Jesus in this, and where am I? We are tempted to think that we are, first, either like the priest and Levite or we are like the Samaritan. But the truth of the matter is this: Before we are anything else, we are the bandits. We are the ones who, in our sin, harm our fellow humans, in ways both active and passive. And then, yes, we are also the ones who too often walk past such suffering. The parable doesn't so much present an opportunity for us to shine as it indicts us as those who cause and then ignore suffering. So where is Jesus? Jesus shows up twice. He is the innocent on the road, the One set upon with violence and left for dead. And he is the Good Samaritan, the One who stops to help. The One whom we do not trust, for he comes from somewhere else. The One who gives what he has, who he is, for our salvation, we who are trapped in the ways of sin and death. Only when we have been lifted up by Jesus' love do we truly have the opportunity of living as Samaritans rather than hypocrites. For it is only in Christ that we can finally stop asking, "What must I do?" and begin, rather, to ask, "What does my neighbor need?" It is only in Christ that I get over my infernal obsession with myself and can begin selflessly to care for others, just as Christ selflessly cared, and cares, for me.

4. This parable calls us, as followers of Jesus, to a different understanding of our neighbor. Namely, that there is no one who isn't. And how are we to treat our neighbor? In his explanation to the Ten Commandments, Martin Luther writes that not only are we not to commit murder, we are also called to help and support our neighbor in all of life's needs. Not only are we not to steal, we are also to help our neighbor improve and protect their property and income. God's Law does not simply forbid horrible behavior, although it

certainly does that; God's Law also calls us into the lifegiving mutuality of community, a way of life in which we are called to care deeply about and actively work for the fullness of life for those around us. Too often we forget this and are no better than the priest or the Levite. Too often we talk about freedom and opportunity when what we really mean is it's everyone for themselves. I'm going to get mine, good luck to you, buddy. We see such a mindset take deeper root in our country through legislation and other governmental action. Safety nets, from health care to food security to disaster assistance, continue to have holes ripped through them. As a Christian who is a citizen, I confess that I yearn for more, for a vision of government as a means through which we care for one another. As a Christian who is a citizen, I believe we can do so much better for one another. But as a citizen who is a Christian, my call remains the same. To get over myself, see the pain and suffering in front of me, and do something about it. See the neighbor in need. Show mercy. Go and do likewise.

5. While in Slovakia last week, I, like you, watched with horror and heartbreak as floods swept through Texas. The rushing waters have claimed 129 lives at last count, neighbors all, including dozens of children. The first and final word about this is sorrow. But in the midst of sorrow, there are always signs of hope. One such sign was the arrival of firefighters and first responders from Fundación 911 in Mexico. Too often, at worst, Americans view our neighbors to the south through the lens of racism. At best, I think we imagine Mexico as second-class country; a place of need, not a source of help. But as group founder Ismael Aldaba said, "When it comes to firefighters, there's no borders. There's nothing that'll avoid us from helping." That is Good Samaritan behavior, for who was the Samaritan if not someone looked down upon by others? Yet the Samaritan helped; crossed borders; gave all. Just as Jesus crosses borders, even the boundary of death, to save us.

6. What must you do to be saved? Not a darn thing. Left for dead, Christ has lifted you up, provided for your care, and will come back for you. You who were dead are alive. In the meantime, stop asking about yourself. You don't have to be Jesus, or even a superhero. Be a neighbor to your neighbor. Loving your neighbor is how you love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind. Having received mercy, just go and do likewise. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.