

“Who’s My Neighbor?”
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – July 10, 2022

Please Read:
Colossians 1:1-14
Luke 10:25-37

The Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber is a Lutheran pastor who swears like a sailor. She says this to those who are offended by her language: “You are not my audience. But there are other folks out there who are comforted by ambiguity, who need a Word of grace which is not covered in strawberry syrup. Who need the stark truth of what it means to be broken and blessed at the same time. Who are at home in the Biblical story; stories of anti-heroes and people who don’t get it; beloved prostitutes and rough fishermen. They tend to not really care that I use colorful language. If anything, they are relieved they don’t have to watch what they say around this particular member of the Christian clergy. I’m not a role model. I’m not really that nice (but I hope I am kind). I’m just trying to figure out what it looks like to confess the truth about being deeply faithful and deeply flawed at the same time – and how to have humility in all of it without being self-apologetic. Because I seriously love Jesus, but I DO swear a little.¹

I like Nadia, and I think she “gets the gospel” more than most of us buttoned down pastors. Because here’s the thing: *the gospel is always going to be more offensive to religious people...* Allow me to explain.

Today we heard again the famous story of the Good Samaritan. It starts off innocently enough. A lawyer wants to know two things: what he must do to inherit **eternal life**, and how to **justify** himself. We can all identify with the first desire of the lawyer. We all, I assume, want to have some hope for the future, to know that through all of our life’s trials and tribulations, there will be a good end. Jesus elsewhere defines eternal life as knowing God in a particular way through Jesus Christ (John 17:3). The way of Jesus is the way of grace, of knowing that we are not called to be slaves of God, but sons and daughters, children of God, heirs of God’s everlasting kingdom, set free to share God’s love for all people. This is good news!

As Paul says in our epistle lesson, the “hope laid up for you in heaven” changes everything. In the end, come what may, we are in God’s hands, and we are saved by grace through faith. This is why we love God, because we have received the good news about who God is, and trust God, learning to yield to God’s grace in our lives. The point is the hope laid up for us in heaven changes the way we live now. As Paul says, it is “bearing fruit and growing in the whole world!”

But the lawyer also “wanted to justify himself.” What does it mean, that he wanted to “justify” himself? The Greek word here, to justify (*dikaiw*) means “to make right, to vindicate, to correct.” The question I have is very simple: “Can anyone justify themselves

¹ Referenced online July 3, 2022: <https://sojo.net/articles/i-love-jesus-i-swear-little>

before God?” I love where God asks Job, “You would condemn me in order to justify yourself” (Job 40:8)? Justification implies a legal system, a set of rules that if you can only master those rules, you will be OK.

This is clearly not the way of Jesus, my friends. That path of self-justification leads one of two directions: The first is complete exhaustion and despair, trying harder and harder only to discover that you are never quite “there.” The other direction leads to self-righteousness, that smug self-delusion that you really are better than everyone else and that God had better accept you because you are so good... *Hypocrites* is how Jesus describes them. So, either way, self-justification leads anywhere but eternal life...

Which brings us to the second story within this larger story: The story of the Good Samaritan. It's a great story, but has lost most of the punch it had for its original hearers... I invite you to think of the cast of this story: the robbers, the man who is beaten, robbed, and left for dead. The Priest, the Levite, the Samaritan, and the innkeeper. Do you see yourself in this story?

I would suggest that if we are to understand the full significance of this parable, we must first recognize that we all are the man beaten and left for dead along side of the road... So many of us come to church all fixed up and looking sharp, but underneath, you know... We're broken, we're injured, we're wounded. We may not be physically beaten and bleeding, but spiritually, emotionally, relationally, we're thrashed. Tom D'Lea said recently that he's noticed in recent years that people are just so angry. And he felt like it's because we have forsaken God. I think it depends on what God you are worshipping. There have been times in my life when I've taken risks going along the dangerous road to somewhere, and I've gotten hurt. And it was not religion, per se, which saved me. It was not the pious and the perfect who had compassion on me. A few times along the journey, it was people in the church who showed the least compassion!

The Good Samaritan is in one sense Jesus who comes to rescue us, comes to you and me laying broken and forgotten by the side of the road of life and who picks us up and cares for us until we are well again. Religion won't save you, friend, but Jesus will. He will pick you up and carry you back to safety. He will restore you to health and wholeness again.

If we don't understand this story primarily at this deep theological level, that this is first a story about who God is for us, I believe we miss the power of Jesus' revelation.

The problem is, we forget how hated the Samaritans were by the Jews. They were considered by the religious folks of Jesus' day to be half-breeds, racially inferior, socially outcast, and religious heretics. Imagine who would be the Samaritans of our day? ... The illegal immigrant? The refugee? The gypsies? The gays and lesbians, the transgenders? Arab Muslims? Oil industry executives? Roman Catholic priests? Democrats? Republicans? Politicians in general? I don't know who the Samaritans are in your world, but picture in your mind the person you don't care for at all. “*Those people...*” That's

who Jesus would make the hero in this story for you. That's who Jesus is identifying with in this parable! When Jesus asked the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor?" he couldn't even bring himself to say the Samaritan, but he understood. "The one who showed him mercy..."

That's the whole point of the story. God shows you mercy in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, even though you made him your enemy... But only as you recognize the depth of the mercy that you need and that Christ offers to you, so can you begin to show mercy to others.

There are other characters in this story that we find ourselves too often playing: Sometimes we are the robbers. I can admit that sometimes I take what is not mine to take. We all do, if we're honest. We use other people to meet our own needs and desires. And don't kid yourself. I'm not just talking about you who have lust in your heart as you see a beautiful person at the pool here in New Canaan. Or you who would judge others and condemn them or call them names in your heart. It is for Christ alone to judge. We've all taken what is not ours. Consider Climate Change and our American consumption of inordinate amounts of the world's resources. Are we taking from our neighbors and leaving them for dead along the road without even knowing it? When so many people live in abject poverty, and we live luxuriously aloof, is that a form of robbery? I can see myself in the robbers who leave this poor man for dead...

Or are we the good, upstanding religious folk, focused on self-preservation? I see myself in the priest and the Levite as well. I want to do the right thing, but I have other commitments. I have other priorities. My schedule is full and I've got to get going. And there's just so much risk I can tolerate. I've got Kim and the kids. What if I might get beat up as well? Frankly, sometimes, mercy costs too much...

Oh, and then there's the inn keeper. Sure, I'll help, as long as there's something in it for me, as long as I get paid...

Where do you see yourself in this story? Do you see yourself as the Samaritan? The Samaritan first of all came near to this guy. He took the journey to Jericho, a way known to be dangerous in Jesus' day. And when he saw the man, he was moved with pity. The priest and the Levite also saw the man in need, but they were not moved with pity.

This word pity is interesting: The Latin *pietas*, is the root word for both pity and piety. As Christians, you really can't have one without the other. You can't love God and not love your neighbor. You can't really love your neighbor until you realize how God has first loved you. It's the two wings the church must flap in order to fly. The Samaritan had pity and did something about it.

I'll never forget a conference I went to a few years ago where one of the speakers from an inner city in the US challenged us with this parable. He told us that the Samaritan got

off his donkey and did something. And then he looked at us and asked: *When is the church going to get off its ass and do something??* I just about fell out of my chair! I could just feel my righteous indignation grow. That's got to be some form of blasphemy to say that in church... But you know what? That's exactly what the first hearers of Jesus' story felt when they heard that the *Samaritan* was the hero.

You see, too often we are preoccupied with our religious righteousness. We are too worried about justifying ourselves. We are asking, "What's going to happen to me?" "What's going to happen to me if I risk helping others and getting involved?" The Good Samaritan, however, is asking, "What's going to happen to him?" "What's going to happen to that person who is suffering if I *don't* do something and get involved?"

Too often, when we say service in the church, we mean serve *us*... What Christ is calling us to do is serve *the world*, my friends, to show the love of God to our neighbors, whoever they happen to be... to share the love and compassion, the mercy that we have first received in Jesus Christ...

I do hope you have the hope of eternal life, knowing the love of God. And if you are broken and bleeding by the roadside of life, know that surprisingly, Jesus comes to save you. But make no mistake: it is the Body of Christ, the church, you and me, who God uses to embody his mercy for the broken and needy of our world.

So, if you have received this mercy, this compassionate grace from the Lord, then brothers and sisters, Jesus is very clear: ***"Go and do likewise!"***

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.