

Sermon on Luke 10:25-37
5th Sunday after Pentecost July 14, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Some of my favorite scenes in the movies are those in which a law professor is challenged in front of the class by one of their law students, such as in “*Paper Chase*” or “*Legally Blonde*”. In popular culture, a “lawyer” is a suspect profession, kind of like a tax collector or a politician (unless you need one!). In today’s gospel, a lawyer (actually, a teacher of the law of God – the book of Moses), stands up to challenge Jesus. Actually, he asks some good questions, that many of us have ourselves. “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” This is a common human question. Jesus asked him “*what does it say in the Law?*” – and the lawyer knew the answer straight away: “*Love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself.*” Very good! But then he dug deeper and asked Jesus, “*Who is my neighbor?*” This is good to clarify, after all. We all agree that God calls you and me to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. So, who exactly IS my neighbor? Then Jesus pivots from the courtroom argument, and tells a story about someone who was a Good Neighbor, who showed mercy. And he was, of all things, a *Samaritan*. He could have been a communist, a socialist, a Nazi, or an undocumented immigrant. Still, it’s a great story, which we all know.

Sometimes when I read this story of the Good Samaritan, it is so familiar that it’s like preaching on Easter or on Christmas, when you wonder what to say that would be “new”. How do you improve on this? Everyone has heard the story of the Good Samaritan as an example of someone who noticed a person in trouble, beaten and near death by the side of the road, and stopped to help – when those who might be “expected” to help the victim walked on by the other side of the road. The Samaritan was considered “least likely” to be the hero of the story, as he represented a foreigner, mistrusted and possibly hated by Jesus’ audience. But ironically, this foreigner was the one who showed mercy, and acted as a good neighbor. Everybody knows about the “Good Samaritan”, we even have “Good Samaritan laws”, which protect a person from liability when they stop to help someone in trouble. But how ironic it is today, that acting like a Good Samaritan today in the United States of America can, in some instances, get you arrested, not praised! How could this be, you ask? Well, let me tell you a story about a woman who may have saved a life, but then was arrested. Here’s how the story goes, as Nicholas Kristof told it in the *New York Times*, about a woman named Teresa Todd.

The path to Teresa Todd’s arrest began when three desperate Central American migrants waved frantically at her car on a Texas highway one night in February. At least one other car had hurtled by, afraid to stop. But for Todd,

compassion overrode any fear. “I’m a mom,” explained Todd, who has two boys, ages 15 and 17. “And I see a young man who looked the same age and size as my younger son. And if my son was by the side of the road, I would want someone to help.”

Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.”

Todd, a single mom who works as a lawyer for a city and county in West Texas, found three siblings: two brothers ages 20 and 22 and their sister, Esmeralda, 18. To escape violence, they fled their native El Salvador years ago and recently Guatemala, where friends were murdered and a gang leader wanted to make Esmeralda his “girlfriend.” Esmeralda was suffering from starvation, dehydration and a potentially fatal syndrome that can lead to kidney failure. Seeing that Esmeralda was very sick, Todd invited the migrants into her car to warm up, and she began frantically texting friends (including one who is a lawyer for the Border Patrol) for advice about getting Esmeralda medical attention.

“A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.”

A sheriff’s deputy pulled up behind Todd’s car, lights flashing, and a Border Patrol officer arrived shortly afterward. The officers detained Todd for three hours, confiscating her possessions and keeping her in a holding cell. By stopping to help a stranger, Todd may have saved a life – but this also got her arrested.

“It was totally surreal,” Todd recalled. “Especially for doing what my parents taught me was right, and what I learned in church was right, which was helping people. So finding myself in a holding cell for that, it was hard to wrap my head around.”

“But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.”

Esmeralda was hospitalized for four days, and she and her siblings are now in ICE custody. Todd has not been charged with a crime so far, but the authorities seem to have been considering a federal indictment. The author reached out to federal and local officials for comment; they did not respond. Todd said she had no regrets. “I think it’s the right thing to help those in need,” she explained.

“That’s what I learned from my parents. That’s what I learned from my church.”

“Then he (the Samaritan) put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’”

The arrest of a mom who may have saved a life reflects the increasingly harsh treatment under the present administration of anyone who tries to help migrants. In Arizona, a man named Scott Warren of the aid group No More Deaths/No Mas Muertes, which leaves water, blankets and food for migrants, went on trial in June on felony charges that in theory carry terms of up to 20 years in prison. The result was a hung jury, but the government has appealed, to “try, try again.” That’s quite a penalty for trying to save the lives of fellow human beings, and others have been prosecuted for misdemeanor offenses.

“This is all about trying to chill the willingness of people to help others,” Todd said. “A friend told me, ‘the other day, someone tried to flag me down by the side of the road and waved an empty water bottle, and I thought about what happened to you and didn’t stop.’”

Jesus asked, “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

So we honor Todd for her humanity, and for helping save a life. She said her assistance had been instinctive. “I’m simply a mom who saw a child in need and pulled over to try to help,” she said. “The whole time I was by the side of the road, I was thinking: What country am I in? This is not the United States.”

So the question today takes on much more urgency in our American context: Who is my neighbor? Is the migrant my neighbor? Or the undocumented? Is it the one seeking asylum from gang violence and poverty south of the border? Is the mother or father, and their child who had been taken from them, my neighbor?

This weekend, our administration has threatened ICE raids in cities across America, to take into custody immigrants without papers, who have orders for deportation – and inflict whatever collateral damage they can find – relative, friends or family who happen to be nearby. Who is my neighbor now? Last Friday I was asked by leaders in ISAI AH’s Sanctuary Network if we would join other faith communities in opening our doors to immigrants who might be afraid this weekend by these threatened ICE raids. Of course, we have already offered sanctuary. So we have opened our doors, and are available for migrant families. It’s an inconvenience and a risk for us, which is not the fault of our migrant neighbors – it is the fault of our present leadership, which doesn’t seem to understand the concept of neighbor. They only know supporters or enemies. A government with unlimited resources doesn’t see the problem in holding young children away from their parents, or caging adults in overcrowded facilities without showers or beds. They don’t know how to show mercy, when we expect that they would. So people of faith will have to show them.

So here’s how the story applies to you and me. You and I want to know what God expects of us, what we must “do” to inherit eternal life. The good news

is that Jesus died for us, for all our sins, so that we – and all human beings – may live with him forever. Your salvation does not depend upon your fulfillment of God’s commandment to love God, yourself, and neighbor – or even your enemies. Your salvation has already been won. Through faith you have been saved!

But your LIFE here on earth still must be lived, according to the law of love – which makes it all work. So when we all obey the commandment to love the Lord our God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself – then we all shall live the abundant life that God promises. Loving your neighbor, showing mercy to the vulnerable and hurting, can take on many forms. It can be reading with a child struggling with literacy, or serving as a foster parent. It can be sharing food with hungry people, visiting the sick at home or in the hospital, or a human being in prison. It can be observing immigration court as an advocate for asylum seekers or immigrants, it can be a congregation opening our church doors to families in fear of being detained by ICE and possibly deported. We may be small and short on cash, but we know how to love and show mercy!

So the question “*and just who is my neighbor?*” is crucial today, in this time of political conflict and tribalism – when we tend to consider our neighbors only those who look like us or agree with us politically, morally, ethically, or in religious faith. Jesus broke down all those boundaries when he “crossed over” to have a conversation with a Samaritan woman at a well, when he healed a Canaanite woman who came to him for help, when he cast out a legion of demons from a man from the catacombs who suffered from demon possession, and today, when he made a Samaritan’s – a SAMARITAN’S! act of mercy into the model of love for neighbor, which is the greatest commandment of God for every one of us.

Today we are challenged with the question “who is my neighbor” as we decide who will receive mercy, justice and welcome in our communities. Will the homeless person who stands on the corner to beg be considered a neighbor – or does one need to have a home? Is the refugee or undocumented immigrant our neighbor? Is the family or individual seeking asylum our neighbor? Is the man, woman, or child held in a cage in south Texas, sweating, stinking, without medical care, a toothbrush or a blanket, our neighbor? Is the ICE officer pursuing migrants and taking them away to detention a neighbor? Is the Border Patrol agent a neighbor? There is a lot to consider here – we clearly aren’t ready to be as expansive as Jesus in defining “who is my neighbor” today. We all have a lot to learn. But one thing is clear: *being neighbor is about relationship, not proximity.*

At the end of the story, Jesus asked the lawyer, “Which of these three, the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” Learn to show mercy to others by being in relationship, as neighbors! This is the call for all of us, you and me: “So go and do likewise.”

For all children separated from their parents, for mothers who don't know where their children are, for men who have committed no crime held in cages without beds or showers, for families living in fear of ICE raids that tear loved ones from their families and can lead to deportation and separation, let us pray,
Have mercy, O God.

Let us pray:

For all those who are weary and

Without a safe place to rest their heads;

For all families in migration we pray.

May the image of the Holy Family

Fleeing oppression stay with us in this year, and stay with us each night as we are blessed

With returning to a home.

May we also be blessed

With compassion for those

Still weary, still seeking.

Still with so far to go.

-Jane Deren, 2007