

- I. Advanced organizer
- A. A handful of years ago **our family was invited by John and Kim DeWitt to attend our first Cal football game**, as their son Josh was playing in the marching band and they went to lots of the home games to see him. Now we were excited for the chance to attend, hang out with the DeWitts, and watch Josh play, but **sports in general is not something the Martens are super serious about**. We don't watch sports for fun, none of our kids have shown much interest in playing sports, so our interactions with sporting events are rather sparse.
- B. As such, in the midst of our busy Saturday, running around with various activities prior to heading to the stadium, **we didn't really think too much about what we were wearing**. We were all dressed casually and comfortably, and that's about as much thought as we put into things. However, as we started making our way to our seats, I noticed people kept making noises, and seeming to boo as we walked by. It took a moment for me to recognize that it was something about my presence that was soliciting the responses. You see my comfortable t-shirt was a red one. And as any good Cal fan knows, red is the color of their most bitter cross-town rival, Stanford. So even if the game isn't against Stanford, if you walk into the Cal stadium, where blue and gold is the norm, and you make the bold choice of wearing red, you're going to solicit a response. You're seen as offensively celebrating Stanford. You will hear people yell at you "Take off that red shirt". And then you'll sheepishly apologize to John and Kim and graciously accept their sweatshirt to cover up your misdeed.
- C. Well, I start with this little anecdote for reasons that may become clear later as we commence today on **our final teaching in this series I've been doing in recent months on the parables**; a series I've been calling "A Story-Shaped Faith". Today, we're going to end our time looking at perhaps one of the most famous parables of Jesus, a story that's become known throughout history as the **Parable of the Good Samaritan**.
1. This parable is a story that has come to be a part of our collective cultural consciousness, even for those who may have never read the text the story comes from in Luke 10. A "Good Samaritan" has become the term usually used to refer to a person who charitably steps in and helps a stranger. Good Samaritan laws have been established in all 50 states to protect these local heroes and heroines so they might not be liable if their aid work turns out to be unsuccessful or there are other complications that result because of it. We have hospitals and other charitable organizations that have taken on the identity of the "Good Samaritan", embracing the call to provide refuge and care that the story is famous for.
  2. But as we've been discussing throughout this series, the parables Jesus told were meant not just to prove some nice, pithy moral instruction: they were meant to disturb, to challenge, to provoke. A couple of millennia later, many of these stories have become domesticated, no longer carrying the same punch Jesus' original audience might have received in the hearing. A story teaching that it's good to help strangers is certainly nice but it's not particularly challenging for us, nor would it have been challenging for Jesus' audience. So today, I'm going to invite us to consider anew this old, familiar story and see if we might probe a bit and find some ways that this tale might have been more provocative to Jesus listeners than we tend to think, and might still have some provoking to do in us, as well.
- II. With that question in mind, I'm going to read our passage for today, coming from Luke chapter 10, beginning with vs. 25.
- A. 25 Now an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus, saying, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you understand it?" 27 The expert answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart,**

*with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind , and love your neighbor as yourself .” 28 Jesus said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”*

*29 But the expert, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”*

*30 Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him up, and went off, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road, but when he saw the injured man he passed by on the other side. 32 So too a Levite, when he came up to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan who was traveling came to where the injured man was, and when he saw him, he felt compassion for him. 34 He went up to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever else you spend, I will repay you when I come back this way.’ 36 Which of these three do you think became a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” 37 The expert in religious law said, “The one who showed mercy to him.” So Jesus said to him, “Go and do the same.”*

- B. So before we get to the parable itself, we need to look at the setup, because certainly that is key in understanding the intent of Jesus in telling this parable.
1. The account begins with **Jesus fielding a question, but it’s not coming from just anyone**. The text tells us this person is a lawyer, an “expert in the religious law” whose putting Jesus to the test. Now it isn’t totally clear whether this person is nefariously trying to trap Jesus or simply engaging in some scholarly-type back and forth, but either way, this is one of those places where Jesus brilliantly responds by answering a question with a question. Rather than playing into the law expert’s hand, whatever his intention is, Jesus punts the question back at him. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” the man asks. And Jesus responds with, “how do you understand the law?” It’s as if he’s saying, “Well, you’re a legal expert; shouldn’t you know? Why don’t you tell us what you think?”
  2. Now **what the legal expert responds with is impressive**, it even seems so to Jesus. He reaches for two different laws from the Hebrew Bible, laws that occur among many, many others, in two different places of Scripture, one in Deuteronomy and one in Leviticus, and he lifts these two out as the core essentials around which the law itself is built.
  3. The first statute he grabs is **commonly known as the *shema***, and it was a central verse that observant Jews prayed twice a day. Deuteronomy 6:4 reads, “Listen, Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!” *Shema* is the Hebrew word for “Listen” which is why this verse was called the *shema*. But the passage goes on. In verse 5, it reads, “You must love the Lord your God with your whole mind, your whole being, and all your strength.”
  4. So this is the first statute that the legal expert correctly identifies as central. The second comes from Leviticus 19, in the midst of a series of laws dealing with issues of justice. Verse 18 reads, “You must not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the children of your people, but you must love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.”
  5. It’s as if what the man is saying is, “there are thousands of statutes throughout the Torah, but if you had to boil them down, they come to this.” **Love God. Love your neighbor**. And he does this well. Elsewhere in scripture, we have folks asking Jesus similar questions and Jesus himself brings together these two laws and proclaims them as the core truths, **what**

**some have come to call the 'love command'**". The legal expert has gotten there himself and Jesus praises him for it.

6. But, as this man demonstrates in his next question to Jesus, "who is my neighbor?" **this love command, taken at face value, can be problematic**. It's problematic because loving God and neighbor whole heartedly is easier said than done. Clearly this guy thinks it's impossible to actually live, at least without some parameters. So here, the legal expert seeks to clarify the parameters, in an attempt to "justify himself" Luke tells us. Well, what does that mean?
  7. There was a group of Jews in Jesus' day, which this man may have been a part of, that held the opinion that the obligation for loving the other only need extend toward the righteous. If Jesus, agrees with this point of view, than no doubt, this guy feels he is set, "justified before God" because at least he knows how to love other supposedly righteous people like him, or so he thinks. So perhaps that's what he's looking for from Jesus when he asks the question. Assurance that he's doing what's expected of him.
  8. But of course Jesus is not about to let him off the hook. Instead he's going to use this question, "Who is my neighbor?" to teach a lesson, and out comes our parable.
- C. So now we come to the parable itself.
1. Jesus' story starts with **a setup that would have been familiar to his audience**.
    - a) The story Jesus chooses to tell is about a man, whom we can presume to be a Jewish person, walking from Jerusalem to Jericho. Now this would have been a meaningful setting to everyone in Jesus' audience. **The 17-mile desert road that descended about 3,300 feet from Jerusalem to Jericho was treacherous, winding, and a favorite haunt of robbers**. This was a potentially dangerous place to be, and everyone there would have known it. Think certain areas of East Bay, or the Tenderloin in San Francisco. This is a place where what happened to this man would not have been a shock. Probably a lot of folks hearing Jesus story know somebody who experienced violence in this spot. Perhaps they live in fear of it themselves. And so hearing the story, **immediately those hearing it would connect with this person being attacked. They're invited to imagine themselves as that wounded person and to wonder what might happen to them if this was their story**. This is important for us to keep in mind. These listeners didn't have a title for this story that focused on a particular character. As they're hearing the story they might have heard the title as "the man attacked on the road to Jericho". He is who they are invited to connect to, the protagonist of the story.
  2. Well, the story invites those listeners to experience as that wounded person, multiple encounters with the possibility of help. Let's consider what those are.
    - a) **First we have a priest come by**. He's one of the special class of Jewish people who minister on behalf of all the Israelites in the temple, making sacrifices there. And the priest, seeing the man lying half dead in the road, keeps his distance and passes by on the other side of the road.
    - b) **Next comes a Levite**. Levites were like a tier below priests in terms of their religious importance. They took care of administrative details in regards to temple worship, not the sacrifices themselves, but they were still a special religious class of Israelites. So when the Levite passes by, he, like the priest, chooses to pass by on the other side of the road and doesn't get near the injured man.
    - c) **What would Jesus' original audience have thought of these two characters and their choice to keep their distance?** Many Christians have preached sermons about

these two passing by out of a desire to maintain religious purity. According to the argument, the reason for their inaction is connected to the purity laws concerning handling a corpse. It is true that observant Jews, and most especially priests, had strong restrictions they had to follow regarding touching corpses. So some would argue that they were staying clear to avoid becoming ceremonially unclean, assuming the man was dead.

- d) But Jesus doesn't give us that information, and a deeper understanding of Jewish thought and practice would lead us away from those kind of assumptions about religious purity being prioritized over compassion and care. **It was considered of great importance in Jewish life to do what was necessary to preserve another's life, and also to protect the dignity of the dead, including a general call to attend to any abandoned corpse that might be found.** So listeners of Jesus story would have understood this. They would likely have been surprised and disappointed that both of these leaders of their faith lacked the moral character to follow through on what should clearly be the right thing to do when encountering another in trouble. They might have imagined that these two were concerned more with their own physical safety on this dangerous road, and so they passed quickly by - an understandable and disappointing response. These disappointments then set up their response to the third character to approach the wounded person.
  - e) Once again, as I've been working on this teaching, **I've been appreciating the scholarship and insights from Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, who is herself a Jewish New Testament scholar.** And at this point in our story, Dr. Levine sees Jesus using a common literary device, what might be called **the "rule of three"**. The rule of three contains a list of three things that go together, the first two set up the third; they tell you to think of what's coming next. Think of "Men, women and children" or "Father, Son... Holy Spirit". Or as she names, anyone who's familiar with the Three Stooges, when you hear "Larry and Moe" you immediately think "Curly".
  - f) As Dr. Levine points out, **"Mention a priest and a Levite, and anyone who knows anything about Judaism will know that the third person is an Israelite."** Levine points out multiple places throughout the Hebrew Scriptures where this formula is used. Something pertains to priests, Levites, and Israelites. It would have been an intuitive set of categories for Jesus' listeners. But Jesus is not playing to convention, he's using convention to shock and provoke. Rather than reaching for the expected "Israelite", Jesus supplies another character, a Samaritan. To Amy-Jill Levine, **"In modern terms, this would be like going from Larry to Moe to Osama Bin Laden"**. Obviously, that's a pretty shocking move. But in translating Jesus' subversion of the rule of three this way, Dr. Levine is helping us understand the impact of the challenging resonance of the story to Jesus listeners.
3. You see, **this story only provokes the way Jesus intended it to if we understand the relationship between Samaritans and Jewish people in the Ancient world.**
- a) Now some Christians have misunderstood this relationship as being one of majority culture and marginalized, understanding the Samaritan to be a kind of social outcast, somebody with significantly less power than the Jewish people Jesus is speaking to. Sermons have been preached comparing the Samaritan to a person with lower social power in our own time. So maybe the Samaritan is recast as the trans person of color who helps the cis white guy on the road. While that might be a compelling story to hear, it's not actually the one Jesus was telling.

4. **Dr. Levine is clear that this understanding of Jews and Samaritans is not the one Jesus' audience experienced.** In Jesus time, this was a story about two people groups with relatively similar amounts of social power who had been in rivalry with one another for a long time. There was a lot of enmity between them; the kind of rancor that is particularly potent when two groups are in close proximity to one another and share potentially a lot of overlap in their culture and history: **it's the kind of enmity that caused people to shout at me for wearing red in the blue-washed stadium.**
- a) Of course these dynamics of enmity between groups that share a lot of common history and culture show up in more nefarious ways than cross-town football rivalries. Think of contemporary Israelis and Palestinians. Or Russians and Ukrainians for that matter. These give you a sense of the social dynamics between 1st century Israelites and Samaritans.
  - b) The origins of these two people groups reached back centuries when there was a political division and the Nation of Israel became two kingdoms: one in the north and one in the South. These kingdoms became political rivals and each of them had their own challenging moments of history that exacerbated their differences, which over time were ethnic as well as sectarian. Both worshiped the same God of Israel, but in different ways, and both were convinced that their way was right and the other wrong. **There was a history of violence and war through centuries between their people, and even when there was relative peace, the cultural hostility often remained.**
5. Understanding this context is important in understanding how this story is meant to challenge; how it's designed to provoke. The story invites a typical Jewish listener to imagine themselves hurt and vulnerable, and disappointed by the folks they thought should have helped them. **And then they are approached by a person they have been socialized for centuries to see as a bitter rival; an enemy.** And this is the person that comes to save their life. The parable confronts its listeners' deepest biases by asking, who would you accept help from? From whom would you resist it? Are you too good to have your life saved by someone you think is deplorable? What if they are the only one offering?
- a) In our era of political polarization, this story has a challenging ring if we're open to hearing it. **I would argue that American politics are the epic social rivalry many of us find ourselves in.** How would many of us feel to be that person on the side of the road, passed by by our political heroes, and only offered care by the voter on the other side of the aisle, the one whose point of view we find so offensive? Could we accept the hand of the Samaritan extended our way?
  - b) And of course as the story proceeds we see that **this unexpected activity from the Samaritan isn't just a one-time offer of care.** This is ongoing life-sustaining care he commits to. He brings the person to the inn. He pays the innkeeper to care for him, despite perhaps the innkeeper's own cultural biases. He takes ownership of the well being and restoration of this person he's encountered, not because they're from the same tribe, but because the Samaritan understands his need, and he is willing to care for him in it. **He is willing to do the work of neighboring.**
- D. For many of us who grew up in the 70s and 80s, the word "neighbor" has a particular ring to it: the ring of the voice of **a man named Fred Rogers.** Many of you probably know at least some of the story of Mr. Rogers, and if so you know that he wasn't your average TV personality. Some of the most powerful portraits we have of Fred Rogers come through the writings of a journalist named Tom Jonud, who after profiling Mr. Rogers, unexpectedly received the gift of an ongoing friendship with him, a fictionalized version of which appears in

the Tom Hanks film that came out a few years ago called “*A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*”.

1. Tom in his writings paints a picture of the man beneath the cardigan sweater. When Mr. Junod first met him in 1998 he went in cynical, in another age of cynicism - this was the year of the whole Clinton impeachment drama - but **Mr. Junod’s cynicism about Fred Rogers was broken down by spending just a little time with him.** The profile he wrote, which you can find online, is stunning. Fred Rogers was a man of deep faith who believed to his core that all people were worthy of care and love. In his time with Mr. Rogers, Tom Junod saw the way he interacted with people and could feel that what he emits on the TV show - the astonishment, the kindness, the curiosity about the world - is entirely consistent with who he is. It’s not a show. Fred Rogers was a person of deep humility, consistency and character. He woke early every morning and prayed for two hours every day for the many people he cared for, or the people who wrote him emails. He swam every morning. He didn’t drink or eat meat. He weighed the same 143 pounds his whole adult life. And he approached everyone he met with genuine gratitude and care that was contagious.
2. A couple of years ago, when the Tom Hanks film was released, Tom Junod reflected again on his friendship with Mr. Rogers, two decades later. **He reflected on how he was often asked how Fred would have responded to the moments we’ve experienced in recent years:** to the era of Trump, and Twitter, and the fraying of our social fabric. Writing in late 2019 on the day of two horrible mass shootings in El Paso, Texas and Dayton, Ohio, Junod shared a Mr. Rogers memory and a reflection on it.
  - a) *When I first visited the Neighborhood 21 years ago, one of his in-house writers, Hedda Sharapan, told me what had happened when he’d enlisted her to write a manual intended to teach doctors how to talk to children. She worked hard on it, using all her education and experience in the field of child development, but when she handed him her opening, he crossed out what she’d written and replaced it with six words: “You were a child once too.”*
  - b) *And that’s it, really—his message to doctors was his message to politicians, CEOs, celebrities, educators, writers, students, everyone. It was also the basis of his strange superpowers. He wanted us to remember what it was like to be a child so that he could talk to us; he wanted to talk to us so that we could remember what it was like to be a child. And he could talk to anyone, believing that if you remembered what it was like to be a child, you would remember that you were a child of God.*
  - c) *The question, then, isn’t what Fred would do, what Fred would say, in the face of outrage and horror, because Fred was the most stubbornly consistent of men. He would say that Donald Trump was a child once too. He would say that the latest Twitter victim or villain was a child once too. He would even say that the mass murderers of El Paso and Dayton were children once too—that, in fact, they were very nearly still children, at 21 and 24 years old, respectively—and he would be heartbroken that children have become both the source and the target of so much animus. He would pray for the shooters as well as for their victims, and he would continue to urge us, in what has become one of his most oft quoted lines, to “look for the helpers.”*
3. Fred Rogers, like the Samaritan in the story, considered the work of neighboring his daily vocation. It was not about *who*; that lawyer parrying with Jesus had been asking the wrong question. **For Jesus, for the Samaritan, for Mr. Rogers the distinction of “my neighbor” and “not my neighbor” do not exist.** All human beings were children once too. All human beings are children of the Divine.

4. **The question this parable is actually inviting us into isn't *who* is my neighbor but *how* do I neighbor?** How do I show up with help for the other human beings in my midst? How do I allow myself to be helped by those I'd consider beyond my circle? If we are truly to love God, and love neighbors that means enacting the Divine affection we've received toward all we have the opportunity to connect with. It means making ourselves vulnerable, receiving care from whoever might offer it in good faith. It means recognizing that those we instinctually might feel called to dismiss or reject might sometimes be the ones we need to watch and learn from.
5. A couple of weeks ago we looked at the parable of the wheat and the weeds, a parable that carried a similar provocation to not rip people out of our lives whose ideas may offend us, but consider how we navigate the mess of being in relationship and resist demonizing others, even as we confront the harmful ideas themselves. I think this provocative story of Jesus has a similar thrust but takes that messy reality even further. It asks us to see the other not just as human and more than the beliefs we disagree with. **It also means allowing our lives to be engaged not just in a tolerant manner but in an interdependent way with those we may think are outside our tribe.** It means recognizing, like the law expert himself had to confess, that neighboring is not about who you are but how you show up: how you demonstrate mercy to others and that's true of each of us. It means going and doing like those who are showing mercy, even if your models are the last people you'd expect.
6. Mr. Rogers neighborhood began and ended every episode with a song he had written, a song with an invitation that is profoundly subversive if we let it ring as broadly and inclusively as Fred did. "Would you be mine? (You whatever background you come from) Could you be mine? (You who is now or who was also once a child) Won't you be my neighbor?" What would it mean if we could be so bold in extending that kind of invitation? What might it mean if we could be so courageous as to accept this invitation from an unexpected source? What kind of a neighborhood might we find in ourselves in? Might it not be one like what Jesus had in mind when he described the kin-dom of God? May we continue to be a part of co-creating with the Divine that expansive neighborhood together. Amen.

#### **Questions for reflection and discussion**

1. If you're familiar with this story, how did this exploration connect with the ways you've heard it before?
2. Are there people in your life who you would find it difficult to help? Are there people you'd find it difficult to accept help from?
3. What neighboring work might you be invited into in this season?