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Sermon: Who Is My Neighbor?  
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St. Michael's UCC, Baltimore Ohio  
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Amos 7:7-17, Luke 10:25-37

The title of this sermon is a question, Who Is My Neighbor? However, that is not the only question that arises in the story featuring the Good Samaritan.

First, where were the police? Where was the protection for the traveler? Modern day police forces are, well, a modern-day invention ... starting, I think, in London in the 1800s. Various piecemeal solutions were adopted in towns and cities throughout history. However, in Jesus' time travel between towns and cities fell between the cracks. There was likely to be no one in charge of public safety on the roads and highways. Protection for travelers came from traveling in groups. The larger the group, the greater the safety in fending off individual bandits or gangs of bandits.

A second question ... what did the lawyer mean when he asked Jesus about inheriting eternal life? I grew up, as have many of us, thinking of eternal life as sitting around on clouds, playing harps, and getting comfortable with our new wings. The prospect of such a life, going on forever, was enough to cause Mark Twain to say he preferred going to hell.

We tend to think of "eternal" as lasting forever, something with no beginning or end. Not having reached this eternity, I cannot speak with authority on the subject. However, suppose we think of eternity not only in a temporal or timeless sense but also as a quality of life with God. Participating in God's love and grace could be a timeless moment, a moment that could well feel like the eternal. I believe that such moments may be accessible to us in the here and now through prayer, Bible study, worship, music, and through appreciation of the variegated beauties of God's Creation.

Remember what Jesus says in his answer, "Love God ... and neighbor ... and you will live." Jesus of Nazareth was not a highfalutin' philosopher or a theologian. He was a small-town artisan. When Jesus spoke of "life," he meant that the lawyer would live if he loved God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength and loved his neighbor as himself. Maybe Jesus simply meant that it was possible to live in the deepest dimension of life, the eternal dimension, if we give ourselves over to love of God and neighbor.

I am not preaching against the notion of an eternal afterlife. I am simply offering an additional possibility as to how we might participate in the eternal.

And now we come to the question posed in my sermon's title. If we are supposed to love our neighbor, who is our neighbor? It was the lawyer who posed that question to Jesus. He probably already felt good about Jesus' approval of his answer about the most important commandment.

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Maybe he hoped that Jesus would list categories of people that the lawyer already counted as friends so that he could feel even better about himself.

Jesus did not do that.

Instead, Jesus told a story about a Samaritan. The Samaritans were Jews of a very particular kind. We know from 2 Kings 17 that Samaritans were descendants of Mesopotamians settled by the conquering Assyrians in the Northern Kingdom of Israel when they overran that territory 800 years before Jesus. They were genealogical outsiders compared to Jews who traced their ancestry back to Abraham more than 2000 years before Jesus.

Samaritans also had their own sacred scripture, a different Torah from Jewish Torah. In addition, they did not believe in worshiping God in the Temple in Jerusalem. They thought that proper worship could only take place at Mt. Gerizim, an entirely different location, about 45 miles due north of Jerusalem.

Scholars debate on exactly how to characterize the relations between Jews and Samaritans. It seems that those relations changed over the years, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. For our purposes this morning, think in terms of the relations between Roman Catholics and Protestants in the U. S. during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century. Catholic kids were instructed by their parents to walk on the other side of the road when walking past a Protestant church.

My fundamentalist Baptist father told me that I was not allowed to date Roman Catholic girls. So, of course, my first date was with the very Catholic Ellen Sue Tamales.

We know that relations between Samaritans and Jews were tense at the time of Jesus. Remember the Scripture from two Sundays ago about the beginning of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem? Jesus and the disciples were immediately rejected from a Samaritan village. The disciples wanted to call down fire and brimstone from heaven to destroy the village. Jesus said, no, but they returned the rejection in bypassing the village.

We can see the tension in the lawyer's answer to Jesus' question about which of the three people on the road to Jericho was a neighbor to the injured man. The lawyer could not even bring himself to say the word "Samaritan." His reply was, "The one who showed him mercy."

The wounded man in Jesus' story was bypassed by a Temple priest and by a Levite. Both had religious responsibilities in Temple worship. I suspect that you have heard a lot of sermons about this story where the preacher said that the Temple priest and the Levite could not allow themselves to be defiled by contact with what they took to be a dead man ... with references to corpse contamination in Leviticus and Numbers. The purity requirements of Temple worship, say all those sermons you have heard in the past, made it impossible for these two to stop and show compassion.

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Those sermons were a distortion of the Jewish religion and of Temple worship. First, the man was injured, he was not a corpse so there would have been no defilement. Second, the priest and the Levite were going away from the Temple in Jerusalem to Jericho ... so at least there was no immediate danger of defilement. Third, Luke makes no reference to Temple purity or corpse contamination or to Leviticus and Numbers.

Someone hearing this story in Jesus' time would not have been bothered by considerations of purity or contamination. They would have been struck by the fact that Temple priesthood and Levitical priesthood were inherited from the father. (Jewish identity comes through the mother but this Jewish priesthood identity came from the father.) The Jewish listener to this story would have focused on the common Jewish paternal descent of the priest and Levite.

That common genealogically Jewish heritage contrasts with the non-Jewish heritage of the Samaritans. It was NOT a case of Jewish purity requirements preventing compassion. Rather the story is one about the lack of compassion of the insiders, the Jewish religious persons, versus the surprising compassion of the Samaritan outsider.

The compassion of the Samaritan does not stop with the treatment he gives the beaten and broken victim. He puts the man on his animal, probably a donkey, and transports him to an inn where he can recuperate. The victim is penniless, having been robbed. The Samaritan pays the innkeeper for housing and food and treatment. He promised to reimburse the innkeeper when he returns for any additional expenses.

The help, the love that the Samaritan extended, went beyond de minimis help. He made sure that the man got the care he needed to be restored. The Samaritan was providing the victim with the love and care which the Samaritan would have provided for himself were he the victim. He loved the man as he loved himself.

Jesus defined "neighbor" by extending it to include someone that the Jewish people actively disliked, perhaps even hated. Certainly, the fact that they lived in separate communities speaks to the lack of positive relationships between the two groups.

Jesus' definition of neighbor did not limit itself to the people who lived in the lawyer's family or town. The Samaritan was a genealogical, geographical, and theological outsider. There are many churches who spend most or perhaps even all their mission budget on hometown charities. Jesus asks us to love more widely than that.

Indeed, in our world of instantaneous worldwide communications, we may have closer relationships with distant friends than in our immediate neighborhoods. We may have distant enemies toward whom we feel more antipathy than toward the local jerks that just stand on our last nerve. Guess what ... we are supposed to love our distant enemies as well as those obnoxious local neighbors!

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A final question ... what does it mean to truly love our neighbor? When I preach on this question, I always try to assure my congregation that love does not require that we endure dangerous physical or verbal abuse from those we love. Lots of preachers over the years have told wives that they must stay with their abusive husbands to witness to them what Christian endurance and perseverance and love look like. Lots of wives have died at the hands of those abusive spouses.

Sometimes we must love at a distance to preserve our safety or the safety of our children. And the church should support those victims, just like the Samaritan did on the road to Jericho. That distance might mean geographic separation or even legal separation. Sometime that separation might require that the abuser should be restrained and contained in facilities that can keep the community and the abuser and the abused safe and secure.

That may not look like love ... but it is true love ... it is Christian love.

Here is a final thought I will leave with you about love. One of the great economists, Adam Smith ... remember, I used to be an economist ... was also a great philosopher. In addition to his fabulous economics treatise, *The Wealth of Nations*, he was the author of a profound philosophical treatise, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. In that latter book, he wrote, “Man naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely.”

By “lovely,” he meant “... to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of love. He naturally dreads, not only to be hated, but to be hateful; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of hatred. He desires, not only praise, but praiseworthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be praised by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of praise. He dreads, not only blame, but blame-worthiness, or to be that thing which, though it should be blamed by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of blame.” (*The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, III.ii.1)

We not only want to be loved, but we also want to behave in ways that are lovable, worthy of love. In wanting to be loved and wanting for that love to be earned, we have to care about the other person and what they want and what they love. We do not see them as an instrument whom we can manipulate for our gratification. We see them as others of God’s creatures, deserving of God’s love and of our love.

Perhaps that Good Samaritan was motivated by the love of God and man for its own sake. Perhaps he was also partly motivated by his desire that others, including the victim and we who read of him 2000 years later, see him as loving and praiseworthy for his behavior. The combination of those two desires is a base on which we can build the beloved community.

Let us pray: Gracious helpmate God, help us to understand more fully what you mean by your command to love you and to love our neighbor. Clear our hearts and minds and souls and spirits so that we can see each other as one of your precious creatures, whom you created as good and very good ... and in whom your Lady Wisdom tells us you delight. Extend the range of our love

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even as you love all your Creation throughout the universe, visible and invisible. Make us open to the thought that even our enemies, local and distant, are deserving of your love and of our love. Move us to desire that others find us lovable so that we desire for them only the virtues they need and desire. In the name of your Son and our Savior, Jesus the Christ, we pray.

Amen.