



Series Theme: Looking at the Familiar through Fresh Eyes

Title: One Parable – Two Lessons

Date delivered: July 21

Preacher: Rev. Joyce Donigian

Synopsis: The “good” Samaritan parable challenges us to examine who we think are our neighbors – who we think we are called to help. This parable highlights that we are to help, and accept help from, all we see or hear about in need. This is also the case with those who come after us – our children and grandchildren. We should be living in such a way that we are not creating hardship and possible disaster for future generations. This is true for our world, our country, and our church.

THE FIRST SCRIPTURE LESSON: Matthew 22:34-40 (NLT)

THE SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON: Luke 10:25-37 (NLT)

MEMORY VERSE: “[The man] asked, ‘Who is my neighbor?’” Luke 10:29b (NLT)

Grace to you and peace from the One who is and who was and who is to come.

I’m sure most of you will recognize the name Robert Frost, one of America’s best-known poets. I’m not an avid reader of poetry in general or Robert Frost in particular, but I am familiar with lines from two of Frost’s poems. First, The Road Not Taken – Two roads diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference. These lines are worth pondering, but the other poem, Mending Wall, is more thought provoking.

I would like to read the whole poem to you this morning, but it is too long – but here’s the general idea. Two neighbors are walking their property line in the spring. Their properties are divided by a stone fence. This is in New England so there is almost always winter damage done to stone fences. Our author suggests that since their properties are not incompatible – the neighbor is all pine and he is all apple orchard, that perhaps they really don’t need a wall. The neighbor disagrees – Good fences, he says, make good neighbors. Our author asks him why he thinks this is the case – he asks – who was he walling in or walling out. But the neighbor cannot be convinced; he says again, “Good fences make good neighbors.”

And in many cases, many of us would agree with the neighbor. For example, we own a house with a little bit of property, all forested. Pastor Doug very much wants to know where the property lines are since his dream is to have a walking path along the property line in order to enjoy all the trees and wildlife. Also, he doesn’t want to put something inadvertently on our neighbor’s property. Boundaries work well in many cases, but we are going to look at one of Jesus’ best-known parables – The Good Samaritan to consider whether walls in this instance make good neighbors.

Good Samaritan. This phrase is seen throughout our society – there are Good Samaritan hospitals, rehab facilities, homeless shelters, churches, and yes – we even have a Good Samaritan law. But here’s a surprising thing – the term “good Samaritan” does not appear in the Bible. In this familiar passage the Samaritan is never called good – he may be just a Samaritan or a certain Samaritan or in the translation used this morning he is a despised Samaritan.

I think we all have heard about the animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans. This distrust and dislike went back hundreds of years. After David and Solomon ruled over a combined kingdom, it broke into two parts – The more northerly area around the Sea of Galilee was called the northern kingdom and became known as either Israel or Samaria. The southern kingdom around Jerusalem and south became known as Judah. Each one had their own kings. This division happened about 930 BC. So obviously there was distrust and even fighting between the two kingdoms. But the real problem came when the northern kingdom was taken over by the Assyrians a couple of hundred years later, and many of their people were taken into captivity. The Assyrians moved some other of their captured peoples into that area, and those who remained intermingled and intermarried with these forced settlers.

About a century later the southern kingdom was conquered and sent its people into captivity in Babylon. When the Persians captured Babylon some 70 years later those in captivity were allowed to go back to Judah. But there was a problem. For hundreds of years those who stayed behind and intermarried believed that they were the true possessors of the land. They – now known as the Samaritans – had taken over the land, had also decided that the first five books of the Bible were the only scripture that was God inspired, and they had rejected the Temple in Jerusalem in favor of another place to worship on Mount Gerizim which was in the northern kingdom. Needless to say, these two sets of beliefs clashed and further divided the two groups. Think of the Serbs and Croatians, or the Hutus and the Tutsis in Africa or even the people of Ireland and Northern Ireland today. These groups, often descended from similar ancestors truly hate each other.

In Palestine at the time of Jesus these two groups, the Jews and the Samaritans, lived and worked near one another due to commerce and trade. Think about how several decades ago Jews worked in banking, as doctors and lawyers as well as shopkeepers, but they couldn't join men's clubs or get membership in the local swimming pools. They were accepted, but only up to a point.

This was a similar situation in Judah, the setting for this parable. So that was why the “good” Samaritan was traveling on a road connecting Jerusalem and Jericho – a road in Judah. We know the story well and often we tend to identify with the “good” Samaritan. Of course we would stop and help someone left on the side of the road. Of course we would do all that we could to help. But let's change things around slightly. What if we were to identify with the Jewish man on the side of the road, a man who was likely not wealthy since he was walking instead of riding a donkey, for example, and he was traveling

alone instead of with a group. He may have been just a poor traveler who was set upon by thieves who took not only his money but even his clothes.

Two religious men passed by him and never stopped to see whether he was dead or alive. Then a hated Samaritan came to his aid, dressed his wounds, put him on his own donkey and took him to an inn where he could recuperate. This man used his own resources – his wine and oil to dress the wounds, used his donkey to carry the man, knew the neighborhood well enough to know of an inn where the man could recover, and then left money to care for the man after he left. Jesus asked the question, “Who was this man’s neighbor?” The response? The one who showed him mercy.

There have been questions about why the religious men did not help their fellow Jew. Some have said that since they were on their way to Jerusalem to serve in the Temple so they needed to stay ritually clean and not touch blood, and that may have been the case. But they also could have been travelling in the same direction as the Jewish man – down from Jerusalem. If that were the case, why didn’t they stop to help? It is not specifically stated why they didn’t stop to help so maybe we can put ourselves in that situation – would we have stopped to help if we had appointments to keep, work to do, people to meet? I must admit that that question gives me pause. In situations like this, there are choices that need to be made.

On the one hand we understand that helping others is what God wants us to do. We are God’s only agents in our world. God depends on us to do God’s good work. I think we all would agree that it was the Samaritan who showed God’s love and care and concern to the Jewish man.

It is good for us to consider identifying with this hated man who showed mercy and kindness toward his enemy and how we might respond in his shoes. But if we identify instead with the Jewish man? Would we be willing to accept help from someone we saw as enemy? A convict? A child molester? A Muslim? There was a time not so many years ago that there were some people who would refuse a needed blood transfusion if it couldn’t be guaranteed that the blood came from someone who had white skin. The question of who we consider our neighbor is as relevant today as it was in Jesus’ time.

So that is one lesson we can learn about being neighbors, but there is a second teaching here as well. Let me set up a scenario that many of us, including me, has experienced. How many of you have tsk-tsked about all of the trash we see along our highways? How many of you have had to pick up trash thrown out of cars travelling past your house? How about

the trash left behind on tables at fast food restaurants – people who chose not to clean their table and put their food remnants and containers in the trash bins provided. Littering is one of the greatest headaches in our society today. Have you ever thought of those who come after as neighbors?

I find this an interesting concept. Not only do we have neighbors in the here and now, we also have neighbors in the future. What we do today can affect those who come after us. I recently read a story about a problem of raw sewage leaking through the basement walls of a building that was part of a Christian boarding school. This particular building was once a parsonage. Searching for the reason for this smelly problem soon showed the cause. When the parsonage was built in the 1930s, the builders needed to include a cinder block septic tank for the house. In trying to cut costs, they used a foundation wall of the house as one of the septic tank's four walls. As time passed the eroding foundation wall could no longer keep the seepage out. So although the neighbors of this parsonage were well cared for in the 1930s, those who came 70 years later, were not.

So maybe we need to expand our definition of neighbors to not only include those who are vastly different from us and those we find unbearable, but also those who come after us, no matter who they are. I don't want this sermon to turn political, but I do think this future neighbor definition has implications for how we treat the planet today. I don't know the cause of global warming, but I do think we humans are contributing. Just a personal observation: in the few days following 9/11, no planes were allowed to fly. Since at the time we lived close to the Allentown airport, I was aware of how quiet it was. But I was even more taken with how clean and clear the sky looked. Having all airplanes grounded certainly made the air look a whole lot cleaner.

I think about our own infrastructure – so many of our bridges, underground water, sewer, gas lines are in need of improvement. And fixing these public use highways and utilities is necessary – sometime. None of these projects will be easy or cheap. But we are giving these problems to those who come after us. We can't predict the outcomes of letting these things go unaddressed.

Even education – the decisions of what we teach our children in school will determine to some extent what happens in the future. What we are hearing now is that the goal parents had 20 years ago – to send their children to college so they could get good jobs – has today shown to not be the case. Our young people are graduating from colleges by the thousands owing tens of thousands of dollars in debt and not being able to find that good job they were preparing themselves for. Now we are hearing that we need plumbers,

electricians, carpenters, and other trade workers, jobs that take vocational or trade school training rather than college.

Churches have a stake in this neighbor idea, those of today as well as those of tomorrow. First we must be open to all who live among us. We should be able to look beyond our walls to invite others in – not just those who find their way here, but also those we might meet along the way. They could be friends, neighbors, family, church members we haven't seen for a while, even strangers. Our home, First UCC, is God's house and God's house needs to be open to all.

In addition we need to remember our neighbors of the future – those whom we hope will carry on the traditions of loving God, helping others, and finding joy here in this place, in this worshipping community for years, decades to come. We are called to look forward, based on our past traditions but not bound by them. Things need to change just as our culture changes. If we are to be good neighbors to our future congregations, we must take their needs into account. That I think is the second lesson the Good Samaritan can teach us. Showing mercy to our neighbors is a obligation straight from Jesus. Consider this as we pray.

Blessed and blessing God, we thank You for each opportunity You present us with to do Your work. Help us see needs with the eyes of the Good Samaritan. Let us look beyond our boundaries, our fences, to see where You might have us minister in Your name. We thank You that our One Dream Mission Team is getting such an opportunity this week. We pray that You keep them safe and that their helping hands will be seen as hands of mercy, just as the hands of the Good Samaritan were hands of mercy to a traveler in need. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.