

Sermon: Borderline  
Text: Luke 10:25-37  
Date: July 14, 2019  
Context: WWPC  
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.  
‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’*

Luke 10:25

I’m wondering if you might be willing to help me start a movement. Or at least to join one with me, one that I think may be building even as we gather here today.

I ask this because of this story I’ve just read.

A lawyer approaches Jesus and asks what may be the most consequential there is: What must I do to inherit eternal life? Give the scope of the question, the duration of the answer, the stakes could hardly be higher.

Ever the rabbi, Jesus responds to a question with a question. ‘What is written in the law?’

‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’

The man passes the test. It turns out that, according to Jesus anyway, the answer to the question of how to inherit eternal life is not particularly complicated. It’s hard and it’s costly, as we’re about to see.

But it is not complicated. You don’t have to master some doctrinal formulation. This is not a popular view nowadays, but according to Jesus, you don’t even have to confess your sins and accept him as your savior.

No, according to Jesus, the Torah got it right. To inherit eternal life you just have to do this one thing: love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. Oh, and then just this one other thing: you have to love your neighbor, too.

Apparently the lawyer has no trouble with the part about loving God. But it does seem to get a bit stickier for him when it comes to loving regular people with whom he shares this earthly plane.

*Wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'*

In fairness to the lawyer, it sounds like a legitimate question. Read one way it seems like maybe he really wants to know. It's possible that he wants to get clear about who his neighbor is so that he can, in fact, love him (or her), and achieve his ultimate goal of inheriting eternal life.

You'd like to think he would love his neighbor just because his neighbor is a person, just like himself. But if he needs additional incentive for doing what the law requires, it still works out to the good.

That's one reading.

But I wonder if the man didn't have a different motive. Perhaps the man was less interested in knowing who his neighbor is and more interest in getting clear about just who his neighbor is not.

On this reading the man's question is less about inheriting eternal life and more about letting himself off the hook.

As a legal matter, if he's able to draw a bright line around the specific people he has to love, he can then be absolved of any liability for not caring about the people on the other side of that border, the people he does not have to love.

If that's the case, then he's asking the wrong guy the wrong question. Because Jesus tells him a story that obliterates that line.

In case there is any doubt in this lawyer's mind, Jesus makes it clear that this question is not about proximity -- as in how far down my street do I have to go before the people I live nearest to stop being my neighbor?

In the realm of God, that view is adequate. Neighborhood, and the people we share it with, is not about proximity, it's about something much larger because the world God created is a global village.

Those bright boundary lines you wish to draw that separate us from them, those are hereby erased. Because we are all each other's neighbor and we are all each other's keeper.

The questions of what it means to be a Jew or a Samaritan or a Guatemalan or an American are superseded by the question of what it means to be a human being. A member of the human family.

All of those ideas are resident in this story. But surprisingly, it starts, does this story, with a robbery.

'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.

I point this detail out because we've all heard this story so many times it's easy to leave that man behind. He seems like little more than a prop in the story. He's the MacGuffin in a way -- the narrative device the author needs to drive the plot forward, but that really has no other meaning or purpose.

So the temptation is just to leave the man lying there on the road and to move on in the story to find out who it is who is going to help him. To find out who the hero is. So that we can identify with him.

But as I read this famous and familiar story again this week, I couldn't stop thinking about that man, lying there, having just been robbed and beaten.

Because it feels to me like he's still lying there. It feels to me like this story is playing out right now along our southern border.

I am aware that we have touched on what's happening along the border several times in recent months.

I am aware that those details about families being separated are hard to hear. And, finally, I am also brightly aware that you come to church for worship, not for a lecture on public policy.

But as the hard truth about the conditions in those detention camps continues to emerge, it has also brought to light a hard truth about myself. I realized that I am the priest in this story. I am the religious leader who took note of this wounded man, and passed right on by.

The moms and dads who are arriving at our border have done nothing wrong. They have broken no laws. They are simply trying to escape intolerable conditions in their homelands and to give their children a future that is not dominated by drug cartels and lethal gang violence.

They have a right to seek asylum in our country. In some ways, that's what our country is for. That's what America has always been about. A place that welcomes the poor and the downtrodden.

But now, when these moms and dads arrive, they are being robbed of the most priceless gift they possess, their children. And then they are locked away, silenced and forgotten.

And I can't take that anymore, I simply can't bear it.

The love and care the Samaritan showed for the man lying in the road cost him. He gives of his time and his money. His love is not theoretical or ideological. He's not waiting for an election so that he can vote for leaders who will stop these things from happening, or provide health care for victims of these incidents.

No. His love is practical and specific and immediate. He pours oil on the man's wounds -- sacrificing something that belonged to him. Something he was no doubt intending to use for another purpose.

He then bandaged those wounds himself.

I don't know where the Samaritan was going or if he was in a hurry to get some place else when he found this man. What I do know is that his plans change when he sees him.

After he bandages the man's wounds, he then helps him up, and puts him on his donkey and takes him somewhere where he can rest and recover. He stays with the man for at least a night, caring for him, tending to his wounds. And then, because the man has been robbed, the Samaritan covers the cost, in advance, of his treatment and recovery. And promises to make up any shortfall when he returns.

Meanwhile, as for me, an ordained minister, the only thing I've done in response to the situation on the border is to be outraged.

I've done nothing practical to show my love or concern. I have taken note of the men and women standing in cages, separated from their children, and have seen the deeply disturbing images of the children themselves, and I have passed right on by.

I've taken no steps to provide aid or comfort to the children. I have not given so much as a denarii to provide aid or comfort to their parents.

So, speaking for myself, that changes as of now. That changes today. That changes because of this story.

Actually it began to change a couple weeks ago. After I got back from the Moral Witness March in Washington I began to wonder whether we had marched in the wrong place.

I went to a legal workshop early on the morning of the march, which was required for anyone who was planning to engage in non-violent civil disobedience and so risk arrest, a time-honored method to draw attention to injustice, a proven method to help change conditions we can no longer accept.

The woman who was leading the workshop was very matter of fact about the whole thing. She made it clear that marches and protests are so common in DC that hardly anyone notices.

These kinds of arrests are so common the police have a long-established routine worked out for how to process the people engaging in this practice. You get arrested, charged with a misdemeanor, you pay your fine on the spot, and you're back out on the street within an hour.

So lately I've begun to wonder if we marched in the wrong place.

What if a thousand clergy and faith leaders instead gathered outside of one of these camps and prayed and sang and protested and bore witness and blocked entrances and put up Facebook posts and invited people of faith from around the country to join us and they did join us -- still other pastors and priests and rabbis, and lay members, and nuns and monks, and Sunday school teachers, all coming together to bear witness. And of us refusing to leave until the police started to cart us off in vans.

Each one of us sending the message to these wounded mothers and fathers: you are my neighbor. I don't care where you're from. I just want you to know that I see you. I don't care about the geopolitics of this issue, I care about you. You are my neighbor and I love you.

That's why I asked at the start if you want to join me in a movement. Wouldn't that be awesome? That might attract some attention.

But that's a really big idea and one that would be really hard to pull off, though I think momentum might be building for it. And we can perhaps aid and abet that moment in a way that I will explain in a moment.

But short of that, there are other practical and more accessible things we can do. The Church World Service has published on its website 5 Ways to Help Families and Children Seeking Asylum at the Border:

1. Call Congress: We can call and tell our representatives to stop the administration from turning away families seeking safety, and to stop detaining children in inhumane conditions. As next year's election draws closer, this kind of public pressure can make a difference.
2. Donate: To help with that, I will research a list of organizations that involved in advocacy and in other ways, and I will send that out via Mailchimp, and we'll print copies to.
3. Host or join local events. Momentum is building. Protests and educational events and advocacy trainings are starting to happen all across the country, including here in WNC.
4. Support families and help parents. The easiest way to do this is to find organizations that provide bail money and donate to them. And again, I research that question, find out who is doing that and I will send that information out.
5. Amplify the situation on Social Media. What I would say that might even be a better alternative is to specifically recruit five of your friends and ask them to call their Member of Congress. With that, you might also ask them to call their denominational leadership and ask what their Church, big C, is doing to respond and if the answer they give is not satisfying, insist that they do more.

And then ask each of those five people to recruit five others. That's how movements are born.

I also want to say our Community Engagement Team meets right here, in this same space, right after this service.

This specific topic was not on our agenda but if you'd like to continue this conversation, if you'd like to brainstorm ideas for how we might respond individually or as a congregation, one this also part of a connectional church, I'm sure we can make space on the agenda to do that.

One closing thought. A few years ago I attended a large march in Raleigh, focused on calling attention to budget cuts that hurt the poor and benefited the wealthy.

As I was walking to the starting area, I saw a sign that read, "You can blow out a candle but you can't blow out a fire."

This is a big issue. Figuring out how to respond to it in a way that might make a difference can be overwhelming. Certainly none of us can solve it or change it or stop it alone.

But we don't have to. Momentum is building and thousands of other people are starting to work on this too.

So, you do you. You do you're thing and I'll do mine.

Pick one thing that is meaningful to you. I'm not asking you to sacrifice time or to give money that you don't have.

Just pick one thing that is manageable within the space of your life and do that one thing. And I'll do that same. And together we'll light a fire.

So, I close this sermon with the same thought with which I opened it: I'm wondering if you might be willing to help me start a movement. Or at least to join one with me, one that I think may be building even as we gather here today.

I'm asking because of this story, and because it's playing out right now along our southern border.

I'm asking because I believe that this moment in history is calling us to act. Because I believe the growing presence of these inhumane detention camps on the border of the United States is calling us to act.

Because I believe the parents of the children in those camps, and the children themselves, need us to act.

They are depending on us to act. Now is the time. We are those people.

Who is my neighbor? How about we answer that question together? Who's with me?