

**Be The Church – Serve Neighbors**  
**Ann Hatfield**  
**Luke 10: 25-37**

As you have noticed, today's service commemorates the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. On October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1517, a Catholic monk named Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the doors of the All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany. These were Luther's points of debate about the church's desperate need for reform. We can think of this tradition of nailing grievances to the door as the equivalent of a digital tweet storm in our day. It was the social media of the sixteenth century, before there was Facebook!

In particular, Luther disputed the sale of indulgences by the church. This practice of payments to gain God's favor or forgiveness was offered as a substitute for true repentance. Luther ignited a massive shift in church practices. His bold actions, for which he eventually was excommunicated, began a movement emphasizing individual relationships with God and salvation through faith alone.

Let me take a moment to offer a word of thanks to Elder Betsy Ballantyne. She is the creative genius behind the life-size Wittenberg door and the handsome Martin Luther hat used during Don's conversation with the children. Betsy also has donated her creative talents to the Tapestry Project.

If you don't know, the Tapestry Project, it is part of our celebration of the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Westminster. Throughout this year, our celebrations have included guest preachers, recognition of long-time members, and an art exhibit, to highlight a few activities. Perhaps not as noticeable has been the slow and steady creation of a 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary tapestry. If you have not had a chance to admire it, you should stop in Spellman Hall to look at the GIGANTIC loom. This woven tapestry is a true labor of love!

So, to create this beautiful, multihued weaving, Betsy Ballantyne has been using her creative abilities to dye the yarn various colors. Recently, one of the volunteers from the Tapestry Project was working at the loom in Spellman Hall, when a friend stopped by to inquire about the progress. Being curious about the intricacies of weaving, she asked several questions: "Who knows about weaving? How many people are helping? Where are you getting the wool?"

As the volunteer continued weaving, she answered the questions a bit out of order: "Yes, it's going to be complicated to get the right colors." "No, we don't have many people who have a CLUE what they're doing – but we do have quite a few interested and willing hands. Gabrielle is our 'go-to' weaving person." "Betsy is dyeing." "I don't know how it is all going to work out . . . ."

As she answered the questions, she continued to focus on her weaving. Finally, pausing in her work, she realized her friend was not only quiet, but completely DUMBSTRUCK!

BETSY IS DYING??!?!?!? She asked, somewhat appalled by her friend's blasé attitude about Betsy's death. NO, No, No, the weaver cried – she's not DYING . . . . . Betsy is DYEING!!! She's coloring the yarn!

As we turn our attention to today's lesson, we find it is not about dyeing yarn. Rather, it concerns our response to a person dying – a human being left to perish by the side of the road.

Testing Jesus, a lawyer asks him, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Instead of answering the question directly, Jesus turns the question back to the lawyer. "What is written in the law?" The lawyer answers, citing Deuteronomy and Leviticus, "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." Jesus is in full agreement with his answer. In other gospel accounts, Jesus speaks these words, calling them the two greatest commandments: love God and love neighbor.

But the lawyer, not content to leave it there, circles back to ask a follow-up question: "And who is my neighbor?" In response, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan – or what some have called the tale of the Bad Priest and Levite. Now, the people who were listening to Jesus would have known this road between Jerusalem and Jericho. It was notoriously dangerous. It was a high-crime district where travelers were warned to travel in groups, get off the road before dark, or proceed at their own risk. That day the road lived up to its dreadful reputation; the traveler was robbed, beaten, stripped, and left for dead.

A priest and Levite pass by without stopping. But another man stops; Jesus names the rescuer as a Samaritan. This would have shocked the Jewish listeners, as Samaritans were their sworn enemies. But as the story goes, he was the only one who dared come near the body. Any reservations the Samaritan had about stopping to help were overshadowed by love. With extravagant generosity, he helped the man heal from the violence of the robbers and the neglect of the others.

At the end of his story, Jesus turns to the lawyer and asks him, "Which of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" Who is the one who loves God with heart, mind, soul, and strength, AND loves the neighbor as himself? Suddenly, the lawyer realizes it is not Jesus being put to the test! While the lawyer cannot even let the word Samaritan cross his lips, he manages to admit the neighbor is the one who showed mercy. Again, Jesus agrees with his answer, responding, "Go and do likewise."

During our fall "*Be the Church*" sermon series, we have been exploring what it means for us to "Go and do likewise." Each Sunday, we have looked at various aspects of what it means for us to be the church – to live as the body of Christ in and for the world. Today's emphasis is on serving neighbors. One of the first examples that jumps into my mind is our remarkable ministry of extended communion. On the first Sunday of every month, teams of deacons and elders go out into our community to share the Lord's Supper with those who are not physically able to join us for worship in the sanctuary. They extend the communion table to those beyond the last pew.

These faithful servers describe heartwarming visits with members of Westminster. Sharing extended communion with a patient on hospice care can be emotionally challenging. But invariably, I hear the joy of these poignant experiences, not just for those *being* served, but also for the ones serving. One deacon finds this ministry exemplifies a favorite quotation of hers: “Life begins at the end of your comfort zone.”

In today’s scripture lesson, the priest and the Levite stay well within their comfort zones. Whether they fear for their safety or worry about becoming unclean from contact with a corpse, they are not willing to inconvenience themselves or take any risks to help someone in need.

I don’t know about you, but it is impossible for me to talk about neighbors without thinking about Mister Rogers. As it happens, this year is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first recording of his children’s show, which featured a friendly man in a cardigan sweater and blue sneakers, who asked in a gentle voice, “Won’t you be my neighbor?” Many of us grew up watching “*Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*.” We were mesmerized by this kind man, who invited us to join him in feeding his fish, checking in with the little trolley, and exploring the Neighborhood of Make-Believe.

Fred Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister, who dedicated his life to serving families through his television show. For more than 30 years, he invited us into his neighborhood to learn about friendship, love, kindness, respect, and so much more. Once when asked how to talk to children about the tragedy and violence in our world, he gave this advice:

When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.” To this day, especially in times of “disaster,” I remember my mother’s words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world.<sup>1</sup>

Look for the helpers. So in addition to the original question – Who is my neighbor? – Perhaps we should be asking ourselves other questions: What does a neighbor do? Who should we be helping? How is God calling us to be a caring church?

The PCUSA *Book of Order*, Part II of our denomination’s Constitution, provides an inspiring description titled “The Calling of the Church.” It states:

The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life. The Church is to be a community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new creation. . . The Church is to be a community of love, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down. The Church is to be a community of witness, pointing beyond itself through word and work to the good news of God’s transforming grace in Christ Jesus its Lord.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Rogers, *The World According to Mister Rogers: Important Things to Remember*, 187.

<sup>2</sup> PCUSA, *Book of Order*, F-1.03.

The church is called to be a community of faith, hope, love and witness, always pointing beyond itself to God's grace. And did you hear what it says? The church is called to do all this even at the risk of losing its life!

Many of you are already helping. You repair homes with Good Works, you provide assistance for the Isaac family during their resettlement, and you offer safe shelter with Family Promise. Many of you donate countless hours supporting ministries like our Thrift Shop, Serving at the Crossroads, Safe Harbor, and the West Chester Food Cupboard. And just last Sunday, we had 700 volunteers of all ages packaging 70,000 meals with Rise Against Hunger!

But still, I wonder, have we crossed beyond our comfort zone?

If our life as God's church begins at the end of our comfort zone, where might God be calling us to show mercy? Who do we see dying along the roadside of life? Is it the teenager trapped by the opioid epidemic? Is it a vulnerable person exploited by modern day slavery? Is it the woman struggling against sexual harassment and abuse? Is it the millions of refugees displaced from their homelands by war?

As Jesus tells the story, the only hope of the wounded traveler was the mercy of another who came with grace to heal and restore. That is often how it happens. One person who has known the saving good news of grace – the grace Martin Luther reminded us of 500 years ago – one person extending grace to another. One who has been helped – by God's grace – willing to risk losing self, in order to serve a neighbor.

Our "*Be the Church*" series started with a longer list than the nine phrases displayed on the bulletin cover. In narrowing our final selection, we eliminated some that could easily have been included: Equip the Saints, Embrace Diversity, and Share Good News, for example. What would you add to this list? Write a short phrase in the white rectangle on the front. In a couple words, capture what it means to you for us to be the church – to *Know Christ, and Make Christ Known*. You are invited to place your suggestions in the baskets in the narthex. No guarantee, but it is possible the most popular response could be the topic of a sermon in November. (Right, Don?)

Mercy, as Jesus attributed it to the Good Samaritan, suggests blessing and unwarranted compassion as well as leniency. It is about pardon, kindness, generosity, and even rescue. Our help to those in need must be as wide as the love of God.<sup>3</sup> After all, God's love has been wide enough to include all of us. With the command of Jesus in our hearts, may we have the courage to cross beyond our comfort zones to go and do likewise. Let us be the helpers in the world, in any and every neighborhood, to any and every neighbor. Amen.

Westminster Presbyterian Church • 10 West Pleasant Grove Road • West Chester, PA 19382

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<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, 166-167.