

**Don't You Be My Neighbor
(A Sermon in First Person)
Luke 10: 25-37
Don Lincoln**

Why is it that certain stories about certain people become so famous that century's later people around the world still know them?

Stories like **David and Goliath**. Jonah and the Whale. Romeo and Juliet. And the one about me and my friend Sam. Y'know me and..... Sam-Aritan..... (haha)

You all know the story. The problem is, you don't know anything about the main character in the story.....it's ME!

I was headed down the **road from Jerusalem to Jericho**.



It's a desolate road; it's a rocky road, it's a dangerous road. It's a steep road – it drops 3,600 feet in 20 miles. And along the side of the road are all these nooks and crannies and little clefts and caves to hide in and jump out from. It's a robber's dream; the perfect place to stake out and wait for someone to come along by themselves.

I started down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, and as you know, **it just wasn't my day**. Out of a cleft in the rocks jumps a band of hooligans, beat me senseless, robbed me, stripped me naked, and left me for dead in the ditch.

Now along comes a temple priest. Like one of your Presbyterian pastors on church business. Except a priest in Israel, who is responsible for worship in the Temple, **had to remain ritually clean** at all times to do his job. He probably took me for dead, and Lord knows that's a serious problem for a priest. To touch a dead person, is an "abomination" and renders one unclean. If I were dead, and he even got within 4 cubits of me – about 6 feet – he's unclean and out of commission for a whole week. And if you are unclean for a week, you can't fulfill your duties. And Temple work was shift work. You took a turn in a rotation of priests. If you miss your turn, you miss your portion of the Temple tithe for that week and your paycheck.

On top of that, I'm guessing the priest is thinking about the "**red cow ritual.**" Now you may not know this, but the red cow ritual is described in the 19th chapter of the book of Numbers, and all you need to know is that it's very unpleasant for the cow and not so pretty for the people performing the ritual as well. After a week of uncleanness he's got to go through all of that. He's thinking, "I'm headed to the other side of the road. I'm not going to risk; I need to fulfill my responsibilities as a priest in the Temple." So don't be too hard on the priest for passing by – he's doing his job to remain clean for worship!

The next guy along is a Levite. A Levite has temple duties, but doesn't have the same rank. **Like a Jr. Priest; an associate pastor maybe.** Maybe he saw the priest go to the other side of the road, and wasn't going to counter the actions of a superior. Maybe he was remembering the details of the red cow thing and knew he really didn't want to have to do that either. Or maybe he was noticing the clefts of rock right around there and wondering if the robbers are waiting for the next unsuspecting soul to come down. So he too goes across to the other side.

What you need to know is that the people listening to Jesus tell MY story is that up to this point, they wouldn't have been surprised. The **hair would've stood up on the back of their neck** when they heard it was the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. They know the road and what it's like. They know and its nickname – the Way of Blood.

When Jesus mentions robbing and beating, they get it, because they've heard about people solo on that road being beaten up. They get it; they understand. And they also resonate with the Priest and the Levite who are thinking about their responsibilities in the Temple. They would have been right with Jesus to that point.

And they also would have been thinking, "OK, we know who is coming next in the story. It's going to be the hero." And who's the hero going to be? Well, you need to understand the Hebrew literature. There were three categories: priest, Levites, and everybody else.

They're thinking the hero is going to be an everybody else kind of guy. A regular lay person. They've been hearing Jesus teach some pretty strong anti-clergy teachings. So they're thinking – it's the layperson – the layperson is going to be the winner. That's the one who is going to come to the rescue. Even the lawyer whose question prompted this tale in the first place would've thought, "HMMMMM..... the hero of the story must be a non-clergy Jew, a regular layperson like me!"

It's not. In fact the next passerby isn't **one of them.** He isn't even a Jew. **He's a Samaritan!** There were few people the Jews hated worse than the half-breed, Hebrew renegade known as a Samaritan.

Nobody would put the word GOOD in front of the word Samaritan. It's funny – I drive around here and see you've named **hospitals and counseling centers** "Good Samaritan." That would've been inconceivable to us – a Good Samaritan Counseling Center – unthinkable to the Jewish mind.

I know – **for years the preachers** have told you that if you really love your neighbor, you'll go out of our way to help someone in need, and everyone will call you a Good Samaritan. That's nice, and it may be true, but **that is not the only point of this story**. The story is not just about Sam! It's about me!!!!

You're not just supposed to listen to this story, and consider whether you're like the **Priest or Levite and then feel guilty**. Or, hope that you're like **Johnny-to-the-Rescue** Samaritan and God's gonna give you brownie points for stopping. Because **nobody listening that day** would've dreamt Jesus expected them to identify with a Samaritan.

So don't YOU do that! **I invite you** to hear this story like everyone else would've that day – **see yourself as the only common Jew** in the story – and the only common Jew in the story is **ME**. You should identify with **ME**– the one in the ditch.

Imagine you are ME! And that means you're going to come to – wake up – in the ditch and **look right into the face of your hated enemy**, who's putting your boxers back on, and wrapping your busted head in his hankie. And your first thought is gonna be just like mine was, "O Lord God.....a Samaritan! Can my day get any worse? I wish I **WERE** dead!"

You hear this story about Sam and think Jesus is only telling you to **go and do likewise** – **stop and help the bloke in the ditch** – and while that may be commendable, it's not the only message. **This parable is not just about good deeds. It's even more deeply about community.**

Remember the question that got us to this story? It wasn't "What must I DO to inherit eternal life?" That question got us to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and love your neighbor as yourself." **It was the second question from the lawyer:**

"Who is my neighbor?"

That's the question that gets us to this story.

For me, there couldn't have been a **worse answer to that question** than Sam – Samaritan – because like all my friends, I despised the Samaritans. And.....I was **just like the lawyer** in the story when Jesus asks him at the end "Who is it that was the neighbor to the man in the ditch?"

The lawyer couldn't even bring himself to use the word **Samaritan**, it was so despicable. Instead of calling him Samaritan – he simply acknowledges "...the neighbor is the one who shows mercy."

You see, the lawyer and I both wanted to **love a very select group of very lovable people**. **We want to draw the lines clearly; we like the in-crowd very well defined**

according to our terms. "You don't mean this one, Lord, do you? You don't expect me to see **my neighbor as the "Samaritan"** do you?

Or the kid with the piercings and tattoos, or that no good brother-in-law of mine, or those skin heads, or those theological liberals, or those conservative evangelicals, or the democrat, or republican, or the socialist, or anyone LGBTQIA. My neighbor, really?

How sad we limit this story to only understanding "**Go and do likewise**" as putting **Band-Aids on booboos**, and miss the much larger point that ALL of us – Jew, Gentile, Samaritan alike need to have our concept of "**neighbor**" **infinitely expanded**.

Jesus is telling his listeners that **all God's children are neighbors**. We belong to each other.

Close your eyes for a moment. If you were beaten up and left for dead by the road, when you opened your eyes, who is the **LAST** person you would want to see? That's your neighbor. A child of God; the one called to be inside your circle.

Because sometimes it is **from the most unlikely places** God's grace comes to you and me – and thanks be to God, on THAT day, **my enemy is the only one who turned out to be my neighbor and my friend**.

And that's just like God isn't it?

After all, if you think about it, Scripture tells us you and I are essentially God's enemies. **All have sinned and fallen short** of the glory of God. It's really clear in scripture. And yet scripture is also quite clear – **While we are yet sinners**.....Christ died for us.

While we were yet sinners – still enemies – **God chose to call you and me NEIGHBOR**. And friend.

Thanks be to God. May it be so for us as well. AMEN