

Visiting the Neighbors (India 2023)

Luke 10:25-37

Yesterday was cold.

I realize that's not news to you – you *know* it was cold.

You know it was walk-to-the-mailbox and lose-all-feeling cold.

Take-the-dog for the shortest walk of his life cold.

Wonder how people in Sweden do this all the time cold.

For a couple of us in this church, it felt especially cold

because we experienced a temperature swing of 100 degrees in the last 12 days.

On January 24th, Roni Widmer and I returned from India,

where the temperature was hot and the food hotter,

and the blue of the sky was outdone only by the brilliant colors that are everywhere in India.

Why were we there?

Well, we had gone to visit our neighbors.

Neighbors, that is, in the way that Jesus defines neighbors.

That's why I had Laraine read that scripture from Luke's Gospel.

Because it's Jesus reminding us what a neighbor looks like,
what God's neighborhood is all about.

There was this young man, the scripture story says,
who was following around after Jesus,
listening hard.

And at one point he raised his hand and said,

“Jesus, I got a question.

What do I have to do to inherit eternal life?”

In other words, how do I get myself to heaven,

how do I know what God wants me to do, to be, to say?

And Jesus, like any good teacher, tossed it back in his lap.

Well, what does scripture say? he asked.

And the young man says,

well, it says you should love the Lord your God with your heart, soul, mind
and strength,

and you should love your neighbor as you love yourself.

You got it, said Jesus. Just do that. Do all of that.

And that's when the young man said,
all right, fine, but -- who's my neighbor?

And, as Jesus often did, he answered with a story.
the story that's become so famed that people know it
without even knowing how they know it –
the story of the Good Samaritan.

There was this guy, Jesus said,
walking from Jerusalem to Jericho.

And he got robbed, he got beat up and robbed and left by the side of the
road.

And the people listening to this story would have been nodding,
because that road was notoriously dangerous.

So he's lying there, Jesus says,
and along comes a priest.

And the priest *should* do the right thing, but he doesn't.
He just walks on by.

And a Levite comes along, one of our holy men,
and he *should* help the guy out, but he doesn't.

And along comes someone from Samaria, says Jesus.

And at this point the crowd probably gasped,
because back then Samaritans and Jews wouldn't have anything to do with
each other.

Along comes a Samaritan, says Jesus,
and you know what? *He* does the right thing.

Goes to the wounded man, gives first aid, takes him someplace to be cared
for, pays for the care.

And then Jesus turns to the young man and says,

so -- who's the neighbor in my story?

Who was the neighbor?

I get it, said the young man. I get it.

The one who didn't pass by someone in need.

The one who showed up and stepped up.

The one who showed mercy.

That was the neighbor.

That's why Roni and I were on the other side of the world 12 days ago.

We were visiting our neighbors, *your* neighbors.

The ones you care for, the ones in need,

the ones that you are not passing by.

Here's the back story: Forty years ago, when David was President of Habitat for Humanity,

he visited India, looking to find a place to start a Habitat chapter,

which would be the first Habitat chapter anywhere in Asia.

And he did that.

But along the way he also fell in love with India,
and knew himself called to do something for the people he had met –
the people in desperate need,
and the extraordinary Christians who were at work to care for them.
He came back here and started FOCI, Friends of Christ in India.

And here we are, all these years later –
we, Greenfield Hill Church, connected by bonds of love and service
to neighbors seven thousand miles away –
the neighbors we care for, and the neighbors we work with.
So Roni and I -- we were there last week to visit the neighbors.

So let me tell you about our neighbors.

Even better – let me show you some pictures of our neighbors.

Open up to the back couple pages of the bulletin and let me tell you some
stories.

Take a look on page 9, up at the top.

There's Roni, walking through a field – actually a mango grove –
holding hands with a woman.

She's one of our neighbors.

What Roni is offering to her in this picture –
love, support, friendship, a hand to hold her up –
that's everything she needs,
and everything we give to her each day.

She lives in a place we call Faith Home for the Aged,
a place where elderly widows with no family to cherish them
come to live and to be loved.

And when we came to visit them that day,
she reached out her hand for Roni's without a second thought,
because she knew, she knew,
that Roni was her neighbor just as she is ours.

She knew, she knew, that when she reached out her hand for support,
it would be given to her.

In that moment, and in the next, and every day.

She is our neighbor.

Let me tell you about the man in the yellow shirt.

Our neighbor in the yellow shirt, that is.

I'm handing him a bag, a bag that's actually quite heavy.

It's filled with lentils, and rice, oil to cook with, and vitamins.

And I'm giving it to him because he's HIV positive,

as are several other members of his household,

and they are struggling to care for themselves, and overwhelmed.

And in that moment, we are telling him that he is loved,

and that we will keep loving him and his family for as long as they need us,

because, well, we're neighbors.

Behind me is the man who goes out into the community and finds our

neighbors in need,

who packages up all the food that I'm now handing out,

and he is quiet and unassuming and absolutely the hands and heart of God.

To these our neighbors.

In the middle of the page,

there's David's daughter, my stepdaughter and friend, Cammie,

asking a little boy what he's working on.

He's one of our younger neighbors.

Along with all his friends around him,
he's come to our center after school to study together,
play together, have dinner together.

That's because if he went home there'd be no one there –
the parents are out in the fields, working,
or wheeling a vegetable cart, selling –
and the kids are here with us to be, well, kids.

Loved and cared for, helped and held.

Because they are our neighbors, and we are theirs.

And one more photo on that page.

At the bottom, you see women gathered together,
sitting crosslegged on the floor.

All around them is clothing hanging on the wall.

You won't be surprised to hear that these are our neighbors,
these women.

And they are very much each other's neighbors now.

They are women at our training center,
taking a yearlong course to learn how to do tailoring, sewing.
Most left school to marry young,
and their eagerness to learn is breathtaking.
And with what we teach them, they can bring in income of their own,
open their own shops if they want.
So yes, they're spending a year together learning,
but they are also spending year discovering who they are
and what they're capable of;
they are spending a year together
becoming a community of support to one another,
sharing stories and advice as they stitch.
“Are these now your friends?” I asked one woman.
“Yes,” she said with a smile, “we're all in the same group chat.”
There's something David wouldn't have heard when he started all this
forty years ago.
They are our neighbors, these amazing women –
and each other's neighbors too.

Let me tell you about a few more neighbors –
I don't have pictures of them for you,
but let me try to paint some.

Imagine an elderly couple,
standing before me, each holding a large empty bowl.

And smiling.

They're smiling because between us is a huge vat of rice,
and I'm about to fill their bowls.

I'm doing that because, well, they're our neighbors.

This will be their lunch and their dinner.

And after I've filled their bowls,

and given them a container of dal, lentil broth, and eggs,
then they pull out a canvas bag to carefully pack it up.

Because they'll be carrying it on the back of their bicycle,
the bicycle they'll ride on together,
somehow, back to their home across the city.

They are my parents' age, I learn.

They are my parents.

And they are my neighbors.

And I am theirs.

And one last picture to paint for you, one more.

A 19 year old girl is posing with me for a picture –

I'm handing her a check for a scholarship, a scholarship given by our own

Bob Stilson, who sings bass in our choir.

She smiles for the photo, and then turns to me and asks if I remember her.

I feel badly that I don't.

So she pulls out her phone, and scrolls and scrolls until she finds the picture

she wants to show me.

In the picture, she's nine years old,

living in a tent, one of dozens of tents pitched by the side of the highway

by families with no place to live.

In the picture she shows me, she is smiling as beautifully as she's smiling for

me now,

and holding a picture book.

A picture book that **we** given her.

Because in fact she has been our neighbor for more than a decade,

this young woman.

We came to her in the slums and taught her to read.

And we persuaded her parents to let her go to school,

and bought her school uniform and the books she needed.

And when she graduated, we asked her if she needed help for college,

and she did.

And so we are giving it to her,

and by we, I mean Bob, and you, and our partners in India who have known

and cared for her for a decade,

and me, standing there staring at the picture on her phone,

with tears filling my eyes.

She is our neighbor. And we are hers.

We go to India – this church does - to be with our neighbors.

We go to India for the same reason we go to Appalachia,

and to Bridgeport,

and to every place we can think of to go.

Because our neighbors are there.

The neighbors Christ gave us to love,

and the ones by whom we feel loved.

We're about to gather around the table that Jesus set for us,
a table at which we share the simplest of meals in bread and cup.

And when we gather, by the power of the Holy Spirit we do not gather
just ourselves here.

In love and in prayer and by grace,

we gather at the table with all those we carry in our heart –
and the ones who are our neighbors.

So around this table today are the ones

I have named to you, the ones whose pictures you see before you.

The couple who bicycled to me for rice,

the woman holding Roni's hand,

the children eager to learn and the women who lean on each other.

We bring them to the table with us today,

even as Roni and Cammie and I brought your love to them last week.

Because they are our neighbors,

the ones Christ commanded us to love,

the one whom Christ loves.

They are our neighbors and we are theirs.

Amen.

As we prepare now to gather at the table,

we do so knowing that we are welcomed, each one of us.

It is my joy as pastor... etc