

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“LIKE A GOOD NEIGHBOR”

Scripture Lesson: Luke 10: 25-37

*This sermon was preached by Pastor Mary Robinson on Sunday, July 13, 2025
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Luke 10: 25-37

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26 He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” 27 He answered, “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.” 28 And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” 29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” 30 Jesus replied, “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. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” 37 He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Like a Good Neighbor

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Do you know what the biggest obstacle to understanding Scripture is? It is our familiarity with it—that is, what we think we know.

This insight is not my own, but comes to us from the late Dr. Kenn Bailey, the brilliant New Testament scholar. Nowhere in the Gospels are Dr. Bailey’s words truer than in the text before us this morning. The story, popularly known as The Good Samaritan, is not only one of the best-known of Jesus’ parables, it is also one of, if not the most, misunderstood parables He told. The reason is that we have interpreted this parable as a story about how we should do good deeds to others, just as the Samaritan in the parable did. While that is certainly a part of the story, and an important part, it is not the intent of the story. Yes, you heard me correctly. We have turned this parable into a moral story, and in doing so, we have robbed it of the meaning I think Jesus intended.

Our text from Luke this morning actually begins before Jesus starts telling His famous parable. Here's the context. Jesus had appointed seventy—not just His twelve disciples—to go out preaching the good news of the arrival of the Kingdom of God. They returned, rejoicing in the success of their mission, as they spoke and acted in the authority of Jesus' name. Jesus told them, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it."

People were being healed, demons were being exorcised, and the good news was being proclaimed. Suddenly, Luke tells us, a lawyer—or scribe—enters the conversation and asks Jesus a question in order to test Him. A scribe or lawyer was someone trained in interpreting, transcribing, and preserving Biblical law. They were widely respected by the community because of their knowledge, dedication, and outward appearance of law-keeping. This lawyer likely already knew how Jesus would answer the first question, but his first question was only to set up the second and more important question for him.

First, however, he asks, "Teacher, or Rabbi, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Remember how Jesus responded? You have also heard it said that within the rabbinic tradition, it was more important to ask good questions than simply to have good answers. Jesus replied, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"

The lawyer answered, "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."

Now that's an answer we here at First-Scots can really get behind, can we not? If someone ever asks you what he or she must do to inherit eternal life, just tell them what the lawyer said—and if they have a problem with your answer, simply remind them that Jesus signed off on the answer you just gave.

The lawyer here was quoting the Shema from Deuteronomy, Scripture every Jew was expected to recite at least twice a day: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

In addition, he quotes from Leviticus 19:17-18, which says, "You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, BUT YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF: I am the Lord." Jesus responded saying, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." Notice here, however, that Jesus did not say "Believe this," but rather DO this!

The lawyer then asks the big question, "And who is my neighbor?" Luke says that the lawyer is seeking to justify himself—that is, he is trying to get some clarification from Jesus so that he can make himself look good. He is expecting Jesus to say, as the passage from Leviticus indicates, "Your neighbor is your family, your friends, your fellow Jews," and if Jesus answers as he expects, he can say, "All these things I have done since my youth." Then the lawyer can walk away with his head held high, knowing he is indeed a righteous man in the eyes of God, and one assured of eternal life. He can feel good about his faith because he knows who to love—but also whom he doesn't have to love.

But Jesus does not give him the answer he desires. First, as a good rabbi, Jesus responds with a good story—a parable: "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."

Jericho is one of the lowest cities in elevation in the world, being 800 feet below sea level. Over the seventeen-mile distance from Jerusalem, the terrain drops 3,300 feet, creating a road steep, windy, and

dusty—one that gave robbers and thieves plenty of cover to hide and wait for unsuspecting travelers. The road was so notorious for violence in Jesus' time that it was known as the "Bloody Road."

Jesus went on to say: "Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side." We are not told why the priest does not go to the aid of the beaten man. There has been scholarly speculation that the priest may have thought the man was already dead and did not want to become ritually unclean. Perhaps he was afraid—because sometimes robbers disguised themselves as beaten victims, only to surprise those seeking to help them.

So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw the man, he too passed by on the other side. A Levite was a worker in the Temple but did not have the status or authority of a priest. So perhaps he passed by for the same reasons the priest did.

In 1973, an experiment was conducted on the campus of Princeton Theological Seminary, where a group of students were told to give a talk at a designated building across campus, as part of their class work. Some, but not all, were asked to talk about the parable of the Good Samaritan. They were told that due to scheduling difficulties, they had to hurry across campus. Unbeknownst to them, a man disguised as being beaten and bloodied was placed in an alley they had to pass through. You probably guessed it: not one of the seminary students stopped to help the man. Every one of them hurried to record their assignment.

Maybe the priest and the Levite were in a similar situation—time-stressed. There were things to do, places to go, people to meet. We can all identify with that, can we not?

Jesus' audience knew that in His parable a third person would come along and bring resolution to the story. But they could not have been prepared for what Jesus said next: "But a Samaritan..."

Whoa, wait a minute, Jesus. Did you just say "A Samaritan?" He did indeed use the "S" word. "But a Samaritan, while traveling, came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity."

Not a Samaritan! Not a hated person whose people are enemies of the Jews and God! The Samaritan people became enemies of the Jews after the Exile. During the Babylonian captivity, the Samaritans intermarried with non-Jews and thus became hated "half-breeds," as they were called. They believed in the God of Israel and honored the Torah but built their own temple and worshiped in their own way. Samaritans still exist today, living and worshiping apart from Judaism.

Well, I suspect it was at this point that the lawyer regretted asking Jesus the question. He probably did not like the way the conversation was going, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. After all, he was the one who asked the question, and now he had to wait for the answer.

Jesus continued, "The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'"

Perhaps the priest and the Levite pitied the befallen man, but this Samaritan was moved beyond pity to action. It is one thing to feel pity, but quite another to act on it.

And once again, in good Jewish rabbinical teaching, Jesus answers the lawyer's question not only with a good story, but with another good question: "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

Did you notice that Jesus actually changed the subject here? The lawyer wanted to know *who* was his neighbor, but Jesus asked *who acted* as a neighbor. Do you see the subtle but critical shift Jesus made?

Apparently, the lawyer couldn't even bring himself to say "Samaritan," so he simply replied, "The one who showed him mercy."

Jesus and the lawyer agreed in theory about what one must do to inherit eternal life, but the lawyer's real question was, "Who is my neighbor?" For Jews, "neighbor" had a narrowly defined meaning. It typically referred to other Jews or members of one's community. Even Leviticus seems to imply this.

But nowhere would any Jew refer to a Samaritan as a neighbor. By changing the question, Jesus redirected the discussion: not "Who is my neighbor?" but "Who acts as a neighbor?"

And the answer, of course, is the Samaritan. Even the lawyer had to admit it.

Remember when I said this parable wasn't just about doing good deeds? In our culture, a "Good Samaritan" is someone who comes to the aid of someone in need. That's a beautiful thing. But what the world really needs is people who will act *neighborly*. And those called to act neighborly don't get to pick and choose who qualifies.

We need good neighbors, not just Good Samaritans. And by that, I mean *us*.

Scottish theologian William Barclay wrote: "In the end, we will be judged not by the creed we hold but by the life we live."

We can be good neighbors because at some point, each of us was beaten and bloodied by sin. We weren't half-dead like the man in the parable—we were fully dead. And a man came along a road and found us. He breathed new life into us. He picked us up, sheltered us, nourished us, healed us, and saved us.

And when we were made whole again, we asked Him, "How can I thank You? How can I ever repay You?"

And Jesus still says to each of us the words He spoke to that lawyer long ago:

Go and do likewise.