



LAKESWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Caring Church

Luke 10: 25-37

This morning we continue our legacy series. The theme this morning is the caring church. We will look at the Jesus parable of The Good Samaritan as an example of what it means to care for others.

Everyone wants to be part of a caring church. People who are searching for a church home often say "We want a church where people really care about each other." We look for that Cheers feeling, you know where everyone knows your name, you are part of the family, you walk in and hear "Hi Norm." You are included. We saw that last week during the homecoming celebration when we had folks visit that haven't been here for a while and all were welcomed and loved. We are also blessed at Lakewood with folks who will welcome and care for new members. I understand some of us are gifted with introversion which makes us less likely to approach people, but we are still able to welcome and care. I think it is one of those important legacy topics that LPC is known for. We are generally a welcoming, caring, and loving place. I think it is the reason many who find their way inside these walls hang around. But some folks slip through the cracks, not all hang around, and there may be lots of reasons for that, but for our part we can always think about how we welcome and care for each other. We may have been gifted that legacy, but we should keep it at the forefront of our mind.

As much as people want a caring church, it is also probably true that every church wants to be a caring church. And caring churches are made up of caring individuals. If we are to be a caring church, the kind of church that makes an impact on people, each of us must learn to care for others. We are not only talking about caring for folks outside these walls with our interactions and mission projects, but also caring for people inside these walls that are part of our family. The part all of us play is to care for those we share these pews with. We support each other in our joy and our pain. In a children's message a few weeks ago, I spoke about caring for each other with our words, this has to be a place where we build each other up and not tear each other down. That is the kind of place, others want to be part of.

So what can we learn from The Parable of The Good Samaritan? Sometimes we hear a story so often that we become numb to it and it loses its power. That can often happen with this story, perhaps the most famous and well known of all Jesus' stories. We name hospitals the Good Samaritan and even someone that does you a good deed is given that name. I know when I am driving and trying to change lane, I will say something like, c'mon there must be a good Samaritan that will let me in. This story has become so much part of our culture that we have lost its power to a certain extent. So, this morning lets open our Bibles to Luke Ch 10 and try to take a fresh look at what is a very familiar story.

We have 2 stories going on here. The first is the one Luke tells of a conversation between Jesus and the expert of the law and then the actual parable that Jesus tells.

The very fact that an expert of the law would ask Jesus, who was a layman, a special one but a layman nevertheless, how he could have eternal life, is in itself strange. To those watching it would be like Joy Atkins/Stam coming to me to ask me about Gator football, or Thayne/Nicole coming to ask about The Seminoles. (Got to keep the balance.) It would be ridiculous. But what those watching probably did not know was that Jesus knowledge eternal life far outweighed that of the expert of the law. We are told that he asked the question to test Jesus. He may have been trying to trick Jesus but it is also possible that he just wanted to see what kind of teacher Jesus was. Regardless of his motive, the question that he asks is perhaps the most important question that anyone can ever ask. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

I don't want to get away from the story at hand, but make sure this question is not one that escapes you. What can I do to inherit eternal life? It is this question, which I hope each of us has considered that leads Jesus to tell the story that we know as The Good Samaritan. It is only God's saving grace in the work of Jesus that saves us. Nothing else, but the Bible is very clear that our faith in Jesus must result in action, it is dead if it does not. We read that in James.

Jesus replies to the expert of the law with his own question. V26. What is written in the law? The reply is the correct one, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your strength and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus tells him if he does these things he will live. At this point it may have been wise for the expert to just say, "Got it," and move on, but he continues to press Jesus, asking who exactly his neighbor was. It is to answer this question that Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan.

The question, "Who is my neighbor?" was probably asked in order to enter into some kind discussion. The Greek word used by the expert of the law was used generally to speak of fellow countrymen, Jews. Some however included foreigners, who had converted to Judaism, the Pharisees would tend to exclude non-Pharisees. There were also other definitions of neighbor. The expert was probably not asking Jesus for a definition of neighbor, but asking where within the community the limits of his love should be drawn. How far does my responsibility go? Who do we consider "in the inner circle". Kind of like us asking, "Should I just love Presbyterians, or should I also love Methodists or Baptists, how far does it go. The thought that it should include non-Jews may not even have been a consideration to the listeners of the parable. This makes Jesus answer even more powerful to those listening. He refuses to answer the question with a definition of neighbor, but instead he tells the story to show that it is the action of loving that is the real issue.

The setting for the story is a real one, one that Jesus' listeners would have known of. Apparently this 17 miles of road from Jerusalem to Jericho stills exists and is still dangerous. As you know the man was beaten up, stripped naked and left for dead. First comes along a priest who does not help and then a Levite, who also does not help. We always paint these two guys in a real bad light. It may have been obvious to those listening to Jesus that it was crazy to help anyone on this road. Robbers often left a decoy lying on the road to ambush others. It may have been that the priest and Levite did not want to touch the body as it appeared dead, and this would have made them ceremonially unclean which would have meant they could not carry out the duties they were on their way to carry out. In Jesus time it may not have been so shocking for them to carry on their way. The shocking part comes now. Jesus says it, he says Samaritan. The Samaritans came from a time when Assyria had conquered the northern kingdom. They deported all the Jews and claimed the land as their own. Some Jews managed to stay and eventually they intermarried with the newcomers and in doing so produced a race, half Jewish and half Assyrian. This to the Jews in the Southern Kingdom was unforgivable. Their royal blood was being diluted. To make it worse, many Samaritans followed other Gods. They had a rival temple to the one in Jerusalem on Mount Gerazim. This was blasphemy to the Jews and as a result, they considered the Samaritans unclean.

I can picture the scene as Jesus says that word SAMARITAN. His point is clear. Your neighbor is not only Jews, not other teachers of the law, not those you like, or those like you. It is whosoever needs help. Whoever you can help is your neighbor. Even those you hate.

Who would be the Samaritan to us? I remember asking a youth group in Central Ohio this same question and the reply came, A Michigan fan, which made me laugh as I used to tell this story in Scotland but made it about Celtic and Rangers fans. What if you heard this story and the ones who ignored the need for help were Christians and the one who helped was of another faith, we consider dangerous?

Jesus calls us to a higher standard of caring and love, a greater compassion, a BIGGER idea of who neighbor is. The word Jesus uses for love here is Agape. There are 5 words for love in Greek. Agape is a love of God. This is

the love, the love of God, we see in the works of the Samaritan, the unclean one, that we see Jesus calling us to.

Look at the story, the Samaritan was a risk taker in his loving. I mentioned earlier the threat of robbers laying an ambush, The Samaritan still cared for the man, his love took risks. It also inconvenienced him. He had to delay his journey and spend his cash. His caring cost him time and money, precious commodities we don't like giving up, this is the agape love Jesus is calling us to. And of course, this caring crossed all political, religious and race boundaries. When these things become more important to us than our love and caring for others, we are missing the point. What a powerful thing Jesus is sharing. We are called to love all, care for all, no exclusions. The Samaritan in Jesus' parable, not only put his prejudice aside, but he also noticed the pain in another, he took the time to be compassionate, he got personally involved, and he was generous with his resources.

Are we a caring church? Are we caring people? In humility, I believe the evidence says we are, and we have been. Many of you are involved in serving our community and serving each other. The challenge for us is to continue to pass on the legacy of love and care that has been passed to us. May we look at Jesus parable with fresh eyes and be on the lookout for opportunities to care for those around us.

Amen.