

We are continuing in our series called *Love Your Neighbor*. As I told you last week, what was intended to be about being salt and light in our actual neighborhoods necessarily pivoted with the killing of George Floyd and subsequent events of the last few weeks.

Last week we said the brokenness we are experiencing is first and foremost a spiritual problem and, if it is to be solved, the solution must start as a spiritual one as well. That means the solution must be found in the Word of God. That's where we find the solution Jesus gives when he said **"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself."** If we are to fulfill our calling as representatives of God's Kingdom, co-creating with God a world-changing culture centered on the Gospel that recognizes the infinite worth of every person, it starts with us living out this command.

To do this, though, we need to know who our neighbor is and how we are supposed to love them. Jesus gave us the answer through the parable of the Good Samaritan. Last week, we saw that it all starts with compassion, sympathetically entering into someone else's pain to such an extent that it hits us in the gut. But that is only the beginning. If we stop there, we stop short. In fact, if we stop there, it would be more cruel than if we didn't notice at all, because it would mean we were impacted by the pain of another but chose to do nothing about it. Compassion is a God-given emotion that demands a response and compels us to action, and in the second half of the parable, Jesus tells us what that is supposed to be.

[Luke 10:30-37] ³⁰ Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, 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, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."

Jesus tells the story of a man, likely a Jew, who was robbed, beaten, and left for dead on the road to Jericho. Two men, a priest and a Levite, see the man but pass by. A third man, a Samaritan, stops, sees, and has compassion on the man. That compassion leads him to take action and, at the end of the parable, the person Jesus is talking to recognizes that action as mercy.

Mercy is often defined as not getting what you deserve. It is an attribute central to the character of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, best demonstrated in his forgiveness of our sin through the atoning sacrifice of his Son, and the offer of eternal life for whoever believes in him.

It is also central to those in the Kingdom of God. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." When we act mercifully, we embody the

character of God and express his love for those he loves. Mercy is further defined and exemplified in this parable. Ultimately we see that mercy is compassion in action; the stepping into someone's pain and the loving action that follows to address it. Jesus shows us what mercy does and, through it, he shows us what we can do in this time of great pain.

Mercy draws near.

V34 says that, after having compassion on the man, the Samaritan goes to him. This is an issue of proximity. If he was going to extend mercy to the beaten man, he was going to have to get close enough to understand his suffering and close enough to act in love.

I experienced the need for proximity this week. I turned my sprinklers on and, in one part of my yard, all I saw was a geyser of water. Clearly something was broken and needed attention. I gave a cursory glance and tried to adjust what I could find, but the problem was much deeper, and there was no way I was going to help from afar. I had to dig until I found the broken pipe and addressed it. That's a sprinkler. How much more vital for a human?

Bryan Stevenson, the author of *Just Mercy*, speaks of a four-step plan to change the world, and his first step is to get proximate. This is what he says:

“You cannot be an effective problem-solver from a distance. There are details and nuances to problems that you will miss unless you are close enough to observe those details... We've got to find ways to get closer to (those we desire to help), because it's in proximity to these (people) that we hear things that we will not otherwise hear; we will see things that we will not otherwise see.” -Bryan Stevenson

God's call for us to love others through acts of mercy only happens if we get close. If you want to have an impact in the lives of those suffering over current events, it won't be possible until you are willing to draw near to them in order to see and understand what is happening in their lives and be used by God to extend his mercy and healing. We got an example of that last week in our interview with Bri, Kraig, and Chris, and I want to thank the three of them again for their courage to do that. But they are only three people, and we must acknowledge that everyone has their own story to tell. Draw near, listen, learn, and let God work through you.

As we draw near, mercy starts to do something else. **Mercy overcomes barriers.** For us to have a true appreciation of the story Jesus tells, we have to understand the relationship between Jews and Samaritans. In 722 BC, the Assyrian Empire conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, deported a great number of Jews to Assyria, and imported a great number of foreigners. These foreigners intermarried with the Jews who remained, interweaving ethnicity, culture, beliefs, etc. Over time, the Samaritans claimed to be the true people of God and even had their own mountain on which to worship him. There were deep ethnic, spiritual, and geographic differences between these people, and those led to a great animosity between the two peoples.

Many of you know I'm originally from the Chicagoland area. In 2016, when the Cubs made it back to the World Series for the first time since 1945, I was doing announcements at church the next morning and couldn't help but celebrate that publicly by saying “And this Chicago boy could not be more thrilled.” After the service that day, as I was making my way to the escalator,

a gentleman approached me, extended his hand, and said “57th Ave and 83rd St.” I had no idea what he meant, my face communicated I had no idea what he meant, so he proceeded to tell me that was the intersection in Chicago he lived close to. I did not know where that was and said “Actually, I’m from Buffalo Grove (think Plano) and have no idea where that is.” In an instant, the man’s face was filled with disdain and he looked at me, slowly shook his head, and said, “You suburban boys always trying to claim you’re from Chicago.” And then he turned, and we rode the rest of the way in total silence.

When I got to the bottom and reflected, I had two thoughts: 1) That was the greatest moment of my life! 2) I now have the perfect illustration of the relationship between Jews and Samaritans. I claimed I was a Chicagoan, and he objected. He considered me based on the differences between the two of us, and it led to resentment. Thankfully, I saw him a couple weeks later, he told me I was his brother, and we have been friends ever since.

But there was no friendship to be found between Jews and Samaritans...that is, until mercy showed up. It’s a made-up story, but we can take Jesus’ point to heart. Samaritans and Jews saw each other based exclusively on their differences, and that created a barrier. But, in this story, mercy allowed the Samaritan to see the Jew in a different light, as a human being in need, and because of that, he acted.

There are so many things trying to keeping us separate these days: Race, class, sex, social status, political affiliation, etc., and the world says we need to see ourselves and each other first and foremost based on these categories. And while they are all important because they make up who we are, if we do that at the expense of also seeing each other based on our shared humanity and shared identity of being made in the image of God, we build walls. Where walls exist, fear, mistrust, division, are sure to follow. That is clearly not what God wants. **That’s why the people of God are called to traverse over the rocky and dangerous and uncomfortable terrain of differences to love and show mercy to everyone in need.** When we draw near to someone, we communicate they matter, that they are eternally precious and infinitely valuable not only in the eyes of God, but in our own eyes too. When we move towards someone in loving mercy, the other becomes familiar, the stranger becomes a friend, distrust becomes trust, and fear and resentment become love.

What happens if we make a point of doing this? Imagine the impact if we decide to take a risk and become a people who break down those walls of division. When we get to that place, real change can happen. But as we do, let us understand the cost of what Jesus is asking of us.

Mercy sacrifices.

If you know the Gospel, you know this is absolutely true. The mercy of God led to his Son hanging from a cross on our behalf. Mercy always has a cost. But when mercy sacrifices, something else is gained in the process.

Some costs are easy to see and quantify. Others are not. The Samaritan sacrificed materially through time, money, stuff, probably tearing strips from his clothing to bind up the man’s wounds, and he had to walk while he let the other ride. All that was sacrificed led to the care and

healing of the man. But he also had to give up his prejudices and, while Jesus doesn't say it explicitly, it's clear the Samaritan cares for this man. His heart has been changed.

As you seek to be agents of God's mercy, you may feel called to give your time and give your stuff or simply let someone ride on your animal while you walk, carrying them along in their pain while you do the heavy lifting. But the cost may not stop there. Mercy may ask you to sacrifice your pride, reconsider your long-held beliefs, do the hard work of finding the truth rather than relying on something you read on social media, or even to look inward and ask God to reveal what is in our heart. You cannot pour yourself out for someone in mercy without your heart getting attached to them and your heart being changed. When we unite our lives with someone else in loving mercy, we expect them to be impacted. What we may not have considered is how we'll be transformed in the process too.

What kind of neighbor would you want around if you were suffering?

This is the million-dollar question, because it's really the question Jesus puts to the man he's talking to. The guy asks, "Who is my neighbor?" because he wants to know the limits of his responsibility. He's asking Jesus to define it for him in a neat, tidy way so that he can easily identify who is and isn't his neighbor and meet that standard going forward. But Jesus, as he so often does, turns the question around on him to make him consider what kind of neighbor he'd want around if he was the guy beaten and left for dead. His answer was "the one who shows mercy", and Jesus says, "Go and do that. Be that kind of neighbor." Jesus is having that same conversation with us today.

In the midst of personal and national pain, we have to decide what kind of neighbor we will be. There are so many voices speaking into this these days, but **the one that must speak loudest and most authoritatively into our lives is the voice of Jesus**. He wants us to consider the kind of neighbor we'd want if we were the one suffering. And as we do, he calls us to go and be that kind of neighbor to others. His words do not limit those we are responsible for. For most of us, they greatly expand it. If someone is in pain and we have the capacity to love them in the midst of it, Jesus says we are their neighbor. Right now so many are hurting in our church and our city, and God is asking us to love them like the Samaritan loved the beaten man.

I want to close with a quote that is well known and runs the risk of being cliché, but I believe it expresses the heart of Jesus in this passage. It's from a speech made by Martin Luther King Jr. with a title that asks the question many of us are asking: "Where Do We Go From Here?" In it he says, "**And I say to you, I have also decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems.**"

So where do we go from here? That's what we are asking God to show us, and this is the beginning of a longer conversation we need to have. But we do know it starts with love. And when love is the cry of our heart and the action of our lives, we'll be in a posture to let God do his work through us, and that is when change can come.