

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

March 9, 2025

# Stranger & Neighbor

Laura Bentley



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Laura Bentley

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: March 9, 2025

### Beginning Lent

This is the first Sunday of Lent. Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem. He is well aware of the fate that awaits him there. During Lent, we prepare our hearts to once again to be formed by the saving life, death, and resurrection of Christ. But with the disciples, we stumble over the things in our own lives that get in the way of fully following Christ's path.

The gift of Lent is to see more clearly so we can follow more closely.

This morning, we will pick up the story in Luke chapter 10. Seventy followers of Christ have just returned from visiting up ahead of Jesus' path. They have gone to these places in pairs to proclaim that God's Kingdom has drawn near. They've relied on the hospitality of strangers, and in turn have healed and shared the stories of who Jesus is. Some have been rejected and have learned to wipe the dust from their sandals and move on.

This is important because not long ago in this same Gospel, the disciples James and John offered to command fire down from heaven to consume a Samaritan village that did not welcome Jesus. Jesus rebuked them. Now he will stretch their

imaginations as to what—and who—the Kingdom of God looks like.

In the coming weeks, we will walk with Jesus through the polarities and divisions, prejudices and generational wounds of his time to find the radical, inclusive, and surprising love of God. We do this in the hope that we might have eyes to see that same love springing forth in our time.

As we turn the page to a familiar story, will you please join me in prayer?

### **Prayer for Illumination**

God of all people and all things,  
Open our minds and hearts anew to your Word.  
Surprise us, startle us, make us uncomfortable  
with ways of the world that are counter to your way.  
Awaken us to your Kingdom breaking through in places and  
people that we don't expect. Amen.

### **Luke 10:25-37**

<sup>25</sup> An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>26</sup> Jesus said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” <sup>27</sup> 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.”<sup>28</sup> And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

<sup>29</sup> But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”<sup>30</sup> Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead.<sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.<sup>32</sup> So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.<sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion.<sup>34</sup> He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.<sup>35</sup> 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.’<sup>36</sup> Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”<sup>37</sup> He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

## Parables

Jesus loved a good story.

Parables are often understood to be like fables—morality tales that give us wisdom, sometimes counterintuitive or surprising—a simple lesson we can apply daily life. Like The Tortoise and the Hare, “slow and steady wins the race.” Or The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing, “appearances can be deceiving.”

With this logic, the Good Samaritan has become common parlance for those who follow the moral of the story, “it is good to help strangers in need.” We have Good Samaritan laws to protect those who do just that.

But parables are more complicated, more scandalous than fables. They are not merely counterintuitive; they are earth-shattering in the way they shift our perspective.

Reverend Shannon Kershner calls them, “Imaginative immersions into God’s world.”<sup>1</sup> And God’s ways are not our ways...God’s Kingdom is not our world as it is.

This particular parable, which was known early in history by the not-so-catchy title, “The Parable of the Man Who Fell

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<sup>1</sup> Shannon Kershner, Fourth Presbyterian Church, preached February 14, 2016, <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2016/021416.html>



Among Robbers,” forces several shifts of perspective. It reminds me of reading a novel where the story follows one character, and you think you understand what is happening, then suddenly Part 2 begins, and your perspective shifts to a different character, and you need to rethink all of what you thought you knew.

So, we are going to practice imaginative immersion this morning. Pretend with me that we are following this story in Luke like a perspective-shifting book.

### **Part 1: The Lawyer**

You are a follower of Jesus. You sit in the crowd as the 70 who were sent out tell their stories of welcome and healing, of rejection and uncertainty. Jesus is among them, speaking off to the side with the twelve for a moment. Then a man stands, calls out a question to Jesus, “Teacher! What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

This man is a legal expert, a scholar of the Torah, someone generally respected and looked to for guidance in the community. But in your time following Jesus, you’ve noticed a shift in some of the religious leaders. They don’t trust Jesus. Some seem bent on tripping him up, on catching him in a scandal.

And this question seems strange. What one and done thing do you need to do to inherit eternal life? Is there an answer to that?

Jesus quickly turns the question back to the lawyer, “What do you read in the law?”

And clearly, this scholar has thought about it. He recites, “Love the Lord your God; love your neighbor as yourself.”

He is quoting Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19.

Jesus agrees. You exhale. That was simple. Love God, love your neighbor—Jesus reminds him to do this here and now.

Don’t be so heavenly focused that you are no earthly good.

But the lawyer is not done. He continues, sounding now a little more defensive.

“Who is my neighbor?”

Who are your neighbors?

The people who live next door. Those across the street.

People whose kids go to the same school. Those who are in the same geographically defined “township” or “borough” or whatever the smallest governmental land area is. Neighbor to us has geographic meaning.

In the Torah, neighbor had geographic and relational meaning. A neighbor in Leviticus was someone who was part of the land

of Israel, who lived in the same geographic area, who was bound by the same laws. Your neighbors were your people. Leviticus had another category, “stranger.” These were foreigners residing in the land. And the law’s command was for strangers to be treated as neighbors, with all the legal protections and obligations that entailed.

But that is not what the lawyer is really asking. It is not a legal question, but a question of love.

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You realize the question under the question.

Who is that I must I love? And who, in turn, does not deserve my love?

Who can I hate and still inherit eternal life?<sup>2</sup>

Now it is Jesus who has clearly thought about this.

### **Part 2: The Guy on the Side of the Road**

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead.”

Immediately, you awaken on the side of the road to Jericho—robbed, naked, and half dead.

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<sup>2</sup> Levine, “Short Stories by Jesus,” 93.

You can barely open your eyes, everything hurts, and the most you can do is just moan and hope someone will come to your aid.

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You snap back, listening for Jesus to go on. You are drawn toward this unnamed everyman and wonder about his fate. You have heard the stories about this dangerous stretch of road. It was not the man's fault, just bad luck. Who would help him?

First, Jesus says, a priest approaches. He sees the man but chooses to pass by on the other side of the road. Unfortunate and disappointing.

Next, a Levite approaches. He, too, sees the man but chooses to pass by on the other side.

Martin Luther King, Jr. presented the most likely reason that they passed...they were afraid. They saw the man on the side of the road, and asked themselves, "What will happen to me if I stop?"<sup>3</sup>

They could not take the risk and went on.

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr, "On Being a Good Neighbor," <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/draft-chapter-iii-being-good-neighbor>

You wait for the rule of three to be completed. It's like Goldilocks. The first bowl is too hot, the second too cold, so what will come next to be just right? Probably a layperson, just an ordinary Jewish man. Or maybe a woman...you know how Jesus likes to push boundaries. Maybe even a stranger, a foreigner, or Gentile. You feel the crowd shifting, wondering where this might be going.

Who will save the man, hardly breathing now, on the side of the road?

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Who will save you...laying there on the side of the road.

Trapped. Desperate. Dying.

Through barely opened eyes, you see the blurry image of someone. You cannot tell who they are, but they keep repeating that you will be ok. They will help you.

They clean and bandage your wounds.

They place a cloak over you, so you are no longer exposed. They lift you onto their donkey and take you to an inn. There you hear them say that they will pay for your care and will soon return. You finally feel safe. You begin to come back to yourself. And flashes of memory return of what happened.

The bandits. The fear. The waiting and certainty that you wouldn't make it.

Then...no, that can't be who stopped. Impossible.  
Your heart sinks. You feel a little sick.

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Who might this be for you?

Who would never stop to help someone like you?

Who would you be mortified to have saved your life?

Who would you be distrustful, fearful of, even as they came to your aid?

This is a Black woman helping a white supremacist.

This is a MAGA Republican helping a Democratic Socialist.

This is an undocumented migrant helping an ICE agent.

Not too long ago, this may have been a Catholic helping a Protestant.

Imagine what is most uncomfortable. Most unlikely.

Most offensive to your view of the world.

### **Part 3: The Samaritan**

“But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion.”

The people in the crowd, including the lawyer, look shocked. Some confused. Some indignant. A few a little delighted that he would go there. But Jesus is unfazed.

The Samaritan, he goes on, is moved with compassion to bandage wounds, to place the man on his donkey, to walk slowly and carefully to the inn, to pay for his stay and continued care.

The Samaritan does not ask, “What will happen to me if I stop?” But instead, in the words of Dr. King, “What will happen to him if I do not stop?”

You remember, now, the question that spurred this story:

Who is my neighbor?

Surely not a Samaritan.

They are not neighbors, not strangers, but enemies.

Some go as far as to hold against all of them the crimes of the people of Shechem (later called Samaria) in the Scriptures. The Samaritans, who raped Dinah or the Samaritan, false judge, and murderer, Abimelech. There are no good Samaritans. Others don't go that far but still keep a safe distance. The Samaritans are fair weather friends, at best, who turn on the

Jewish people as soon as things get tough. They are not to be trusted.

To be fair, Samaritans feel quite similarly about the Jewish people.

But this Samaritan, says Jesus, came upon a Jew in desperate need and was viscerally moved to compassion.

Not hatred. Not disgust. Not schadenfreude—that feeling of satisfaction when something bad happens to someone you think deserves it.

He is moved to compassion, to care, to risk-taking generosity.

He felt it in his guts that he could not turn away.

Jesus stops. And you realize the story is finished.

You see Jesus look again to the lawyer, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

As expert in the law answers, the crowd is so silent you could hear a pin drop, “The one who showed him mercy.”

Jesus looks to him then to the crowd, “Go and do likewise.”

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Suddenly, the story rewinds. You are caught up back on the road to Jericho, but now you are walking with your donkey. Who might you come upon who looks at you with distrust, even fear?

Who would *not* believe that someone like you would do anything to benefit someone like them?

### **Epilogue: The Neighborhood of God's Kingdom**

Their first response, and perhaps ours, too, was likely, “But that would never happen!”

We may imagine a world where enemies act like neighbors, where strangers can be found trustworthy. But we are quick to snap ourselves out of God's dream and back into our reality. Yet, Jesus does not leave the story in the storybook. “Go and do likewise,” he says.

Through parables, Jesus immerses our imaginations in the reality of God's Kingdom. Then, he insists that we move it from our heads into our lives.

Having a Kingdom imagination enables us to see what ought to be, what could be, beyond what is—to imagine a world we do not think is possible—then Christ calls us to live as if it is,

not only possible, but inevitable in the coming of God's Kingdom.

Do we have eyes to see a world where the cycles that we create of violence, hatred, fear, division, and distrust are broken?

Then do we have the courage to walk through this world as if it is God's neighborhood?

May we go and do likewise. Amen.





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2040 Washington Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15241  
412-835-6630  
[www.westminster-church.org](http://www.westminster-church.org)