

THE DANGEROUS ACT OF LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOR

Luke 10:25-37

January 10, 2016

First Christian Church

Rev. Renee Hoke

Wichita Falls, Texas

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.* ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ 26He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ 27He 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 neighbour as yourself.’ 28And 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 neighbour?’ 30Jesus 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. 31Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34He 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. 35The 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.” 36Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ 37He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

One of the highlights of Thanksgiving 2015 for me was being part of the group from our church who delivered turkeys and all the trimmings for a Thanksgiving dinner to homes in our community. The temperature outside that Saturday morning was about as cold as the frozen turkeys we carried to the door. But the reception was warm and it was a blessing to love our neighbors in such a practical way.

I mention that event because I want to tell you about a conversation I had later with a member of our church family who also helped to deliver Thanksgiving baskets that day. He stopped by my office to tell me about the three families he visited.

His first stop was a downstairs apartment. The young mom who answered the door had a toddler on her hip and a baby on the way. There was a little girl sitting

on the sofa watching cartoons. To say that the apartment was cluttered would be an understatement. But our church member quickly cleared a spot on the counter where he could place the turkey and bag of groceries. The mom was gracious and thankful as he departed.

As he walked to his car, he wondered if that apartment even had a roasting pan that would hold a turkey. There was no table to sit around for a family meal. He wondered how that family would make it through Christmas.

But there were more deliveries to make and the next address on his list made him smile. He had happy childhood memories connected with the next neighborhood he visited and that helped him shake off some of his worries and sadness about his first delivery. He stopped in front of a house with a small blow-up Santa decoration in the front yard. That made him feel a bit more hopeful about the well-being of the family inside. The mom who answered the door with a warm smile seemed to be in her 30's. Three boys ages 4-8 sat on the sofa watching cartoons. The youngest child, a three year old girl, wrapped her arms around our delivery man's legs.

The room was spare with only a few furnishings but it was orderly. There was a kitchen table and chairs. The children were dressed and polite. The mom expressed her gratitude for the food.

This time on the way to the car our member worried about the prospects for these two single-parent households with no husband or father in sight.

The third and last delivery was to an apartment in subsidized housing. He knocked and an older woman's voice inside called for someone to "Get the door!" The young mom who opened the door this time was most likely a teen. There was a toddler crawling nearby wearing only a diaper. The room was almost empty—one

chair on which the grandmother was seated, and a television on a rolling cart. Through the open door the girl took the food and offered her thanks. Over her shoulder, it appeared that the kitchen was empty, no table and chairs for a family meal.

This walk back to the car was the longest. “Renee, I realize that I am living in a bubble,” he told me, blinking away some tears. “Don’t get me wrong, it was a good thing to deliver that food, but we barely touched the need. How can these families get along?”

Maybe you’ve had a similar experience recently—a moment when God opened your heart to truly see the difficult reality of someone’s life. For the next four Sundays, we are going to consider what it looks like in 2016 to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. That’s the second part of the great commandment, after all. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. This is a generous congregation. We have placed some symbols of that generosity on the communion table today—a children’s jacket representing our Coats for Kids ministry, a basket of food representing the Thanksgiving baskets we prepare and deliver every year, and a book representing our newest ministry helping second graders at Fain Elementary School become good readers. We were trained on Friday to begin mentoring students.

But the story I told you a minute ago reminds us that it’s possible to be a generous congregation and still live in a bubble that insulates us from the everyday struggle for survival facing so many families in Wichita County. Can we wrap school children in warm coats every November and not worry about what they have to eat when they get home from school?

In his book *The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor*, pastor and theologian Mark Labberton addresses the issue of living in a bubble. He asks:

Why does the church, the body of Christ, live so complacently in a world where each year nearly eight million children die before the age of five, or where nearly a million children are sold into sex trafficking? Labberton continues: If our hearts have been made to love God and to love our neighbor, why is it that we can know about injustice but be so complacent about it?

Doesn't loving our neighbor as ourselves require us to know the story of the people we are serving?

That should be enough difficult questions for one sermon. So now for some encouragement. Our member who delivered turkeys has already taken the first step toward the dangerous act of loving our neighbor. He chose to pay attention, to try to see what was really there. As he observed that day, and reflected on it later, he made a conscious effort to refrain from filling in the blanks, making assumptions about the details he didn't know about those particular neighbors. Our friend realized that the questions he asked himself as he left each home reflected a personal bias or two but as a follower of Jesus he tried his best to see and love those families as if Jesus was there in his place. And that made his heart heavy. He feared the future for these young mothers trying desperately to raise their children.

To see the world through Jesus' eyes always challenges our "us" versus "them" way of organizing and explaining the world around us. The temptation always is to assume that way "we" see the world is normal, and we scratch our heads about those outside our circle because we just don't know what "they" are thinking. Over the holidays I engaged in a conversation with a knuckle head relative of mine convinced that all the teachers who were people of faith had exited public

schools years ago. You can't be a Christian and work in public schools today, he said. Everybody knows that.

That's interesting, I told him, because I know some very faithful public school teachers who are part of the congregation I serve. I wonder, I asked him, have you talked to some public school teachers about how their faith informs their teaching?

Of course he has not. Easier to draw your conclusions without actually talking with real live people who might challenge what you're thinking.

But that's why paying attention is so important. How can we truly love neighbors we don't know? How can we serve if we don't understand?

Adam Marton is Editor of the Baltimore Sun. His story was told on Facebook and Morning Edition recently. Marton was working on an end-of-the-year crime report for the New Year's Day edition of his paper when he came across a familiar name on the list of homicide victims in 2015. It was Theolonius Monk, not the famous jazz musician, but a young man named for him who had stolen the editor's car a few years ago. The car was taken one night when it was parked in front of a body shop. Marton had dropped it off after hours and placed in the key in a night drop box. A few weeks later the police called to say they had recovered Marton's car. Marton posted the rest of the story on Facebook. Here's what he wrote:

“When I got my car back, Thelonious had installed a baby seat and the car was strewn with job applications. It was, and remains, one of the most heartbreaking scenes of my life. I'm a journalist, and I'm really interested in stories about people and their relationships in the world. I'm always trying to understand. And what I saw in the car told me a story about this man's life. It seemed at the time, and still seems today, that he took this car, trying to make it his own car, right? He was thinking “I have this car, now I can have a new life. I can go get a job

and drive my baby around.” When I picked up my car, I expected to see a crime scene, and what I saw instead was inside somebody’s life.

When Marton posted his story online, he heard from lots of people. He heard from family members who said Thelonius made a lot of mistakes but he was always trying to turn his life around. Marton heard from the people in the system who knew Thelonius, including a Baltimore city public defender who said how hard it is to find out that someone she has worked with has become a homicide statistic.

After I heard this story on the radio, I went to the website and saw how listeners like me had responded to the story. There was sympathy, there was judgment, the responses divided up in a predictable fashion. I was reminded that we live in a time when offering your opinion has been elevated to a civic duty and once you have rendered your judgment or expressed your sympathy you have done your part and are released from responsibility for any further action.

Interesting. The Bible isn’t so hot on opinions.

When a lawyer asked Jesus about the greatest commandment, Jesus answered that we must be all in when it comes to loving God and neighbor. When the lawyer asks for clarification on the definition of neighbor, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. You can’t love your neighbor and pass by on the other side. You can’t excuse yourself with demanding schedules or personal boundaries even if they’re religious ones.

Jesus is very specific about what it means to be a neighbor.

Newspaper Editor Adam Marton says he can’t help it, he’s interested in people, he is always trying to understand.

So let’s begin there. Let’s begin by paying attention.