

And Who is My Neighbor? Hannah Conner, July 13, 2025

And who is my neighbor? The one who showed mercy.....

Will you pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

You've probably never heard Joey in the throes of a conversation with a customer service representative...say...for the internet company. The very first thing he ALWAYS does when that person picks up the phone is say "Hi, how are you today?" He then continues to ask questions throughout the conversation. "Where are you based out of" "What's the weather like?" These questions, this easy conversation that is second nature to him, has never felt like quite as easy to me. In humanizing the person on the other end of the line, though, he is giving them an incredible gift. I very much doubt if any of those people end the conversation without a smile on their face.

In our gospel reading today, the passage opens with an expert in the law standing up to test Jesus. Perhaps he was just looking for Jesus to testify, but maybe this law expert was provoking Jesus and trying to rile him with a question that he believed Jesus might not be able to answer. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus didn't take the bait - instead, he responded (perhaps as a legal expert would) with his own question, "what is written in the Law? How do you read it?" The legal expert's knowledge of the Torah is extensive, and Jesus tells him he has answered correctly, but this expert

can't leave it there. He has to save face and keep questioning Jesus – “And who is my neighbor?” Does he mean who is it that I should care about? Who should I stop and help? Who is worthy of my love? Maybe he is really asking who can I exclude from that list? Can I be discriminatory in who I offer my time and compassion to?

Then comes the parable we all know well, where a victim of a violent crime has been left for dead on the roadside. A priest passes by, a leader of the faith community! And he does not stop - no, he crosses to the opposite side of the road. A Levite passes next, another person in the religious community who has designated power and authority. And they do not stop. It's the Samaritan who stops. The outsider. The one demeaned by the community. It's the Samaritan who notices the man, acknowledges the severity of the situation, takes action in the moment, and then continues to ensure his well-being by bringing him to an inn and paying the innkeeper to look after him.

After this story, Jesus asks the expert in the law which of those three was a neighbor. Jesus has left us no choice but to answer with the only viable option - The Samaritan is the neighbor. The one who showed mercy. That's the answer. The question now is not “who do I have to love?”, but has been turned around to ask “am I one who loves?” The way that we show up in the world cannot be dictated by the actions, positions of power, or the leadership of others, but by the disposition of our own hearts and the ways that disposition manifests in our actions.

The one who shows mercy does not give based on what they think someone deserves, but instead responds to what the person needs. It's not mercy when we offer love with conditions attached. It's not mercy to give to those who need it and then judge them for their choices. It is also still not mercy when we offer a performative version of compassion that prioritizes our own convenience.

The way we show up in the world is dictated by the disposition of our own hearts and the ways that we can express those feelings in our actions.

I recently brought back some signage from post-covid days at the bakery that says "Take a breath, the person on the other side of the counter is a human being - just like you". Though unfortunate, it is easy as we are going about our too busy lives in a world where silent stoic struggling has become normal, to not realize how our actions and behaviors affect others. Or to just look the other way and not engage with people who could use some lifting up. But what if we changed that? What if we offered our help every time we noticed someone who might need it. What if we took 2 extra seconds to ask that stranger on the other end of the phone line how they are doing today? What if we always bent over to pick up the item that somebody dropped, even if it makes our knees creak or we were already late for an appointment?

What is it about our culture today that allows us to feel ok turning the other way? I'd like to blame it on the isolation of covid, or this culture of fear and hatred that is being modeled by the leaders of our country, but I feel like it

goes back further than that. What are we protecting ourselves from? When did we stop being a village, taking time to care for each other? When did our time become so precious that we can't freely share it?

I realize that I am speaking to a room full of people who are remarkably good at caring for others and volunteering much of their time. I think that we can also probably all acknowledge that there is room to grow, and certainly the need for positive change in our world. I wasn't able to be here last week, but in reading the newsletter it sounds like there was good discussion about what it is we can do now to do right in this world.

The other day while scrolling through instagram....I know...I know... why?!? I came across a video of a helicopter crash-landing in a populated area just next to a cafe with outdoor seating - and security cameras capturing the footage I was watching. I'm not sure what compelled me to keep watching, rather than scroll on by, but what happened at the end of that video has stayed with me. As the people sitting at the cafe realized what was happening, immediately after impact, they all stood up and ran TOWARD the crash. They dropped everything and ran into the chaos to help. How many of us would do the same? I can't say for sure that I would in that situation. Having never been in a situation like that, I might guess that fear would hold me back. I would like to be the person that would drop everything and run, but I know I have some work to do before I can let go of all of my fear and worry. Last month Grace reminded us in her sermon that we can't trust in God and worry at the same time. I have thought about that phrase many times, almost every day actually, over the past year since I

first heard it in Philadelphia, and many times more since Grace reminded us a month ago.

At a recent staff meeting, I instructed everyone to come with a quote that inspired them. I then took all the quotes, printed them out and hung them around the bakery. Nearest my office hangs an Amelia Earhart quote: “The most difficult thing is the decision to act, the rest is merely tenacity”. In this broken world where entire communities and entire groups of people are battered and lying on the side of the road...figuratively AND literally, can we learn to open our hearts to trust in God and be the ones who run towards the disaster instead of protecting ourselves at the expense of those who are hurting and need our help?

Can we also open ourselves up to trust in God, and accept the mercy shown to us by others? “The world will give you that once in awhile” says a quote by Sue Monk Kidd, “a brief timeout; the boxing bell rings and you go to your corner, where somebody dabs mercy on your beat-up life”.

As we heard earlier in the poem that Alice read, “before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing”. One cannot know peace without first knowing conflict. You cannot have light without darkness.

We cannot have a thriving, vibrant community...country...world...where everyone agrees with each other and has the same beliefs and acts the same. When we picked Finn up from Governor’s Institute for the Arts last Sunday (which I could talk about for so many more minutes, but I know I don’t have the time today...) the Director stood up on the stage at the

beginning and spoke a little bit about what it means to take 180 students and create - in just two weeks - a community in which everyone contributes and feels valued and respected and loved. He said "if you are in a room and you agree with everyone in it, you are in too small of a room".

Perhaps we cannot freely and easily offer mercy until we have learned to receive and accept it.

I would like to leave you with several verses from a poem by Corrie Williamson called "Mercy Me":

Said the womenfolk where I was raised, and in my mind
mercy was a verb, the action reflexive. Though of course
the wolf in the kingdom of winter does not mercy
the elk. The owl does not mercy the hare
that has trembled loose from its delicate coat of stillness.

The word has been used since the twelfth century to mean
God's forgiveness of his creatures' offenses.

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You could say and not lie that this is most of what I long for in the way
of distance and the way of desire: may the fetters
fall from all of us this year.

May the wild light
get way down in our bones. May we without requital,
mercy one another with hands like wings,
with unarmed hands.

Amen.