

November 10, 2024

## **Building Faith for Everyday Life**

### **II. Community With Others**

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

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Earlier this year the Surgeon General published a study entitled, *“Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation.”*<sup>1</sup> The report stated that half of all adults report experiencing significant loneliness. And that statistic, as the report points out, was before *“the Covid-19 pandemic cut off so many of us from friends, loved ones, and support systems, exacerbating loneliness and isolation.”*<sup>2</sup> But it is not just the fact of loneliness that concerns the Surgeon General in this report, it is far more importantly the impact of loneliness on our physical and mental health. Loneliness, says the report, *“Is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death.”*<sup>3</sup> In fact, says the report, loneliness increases the risk of premature death by 26%, the life expectancy equivalent of smoking fifteen cigarettes a day over the course of one’s whole life. In other words, as the Lord our God knew from the very beginning of His creation of Adam: *“It is not good that the man should be alone.”*<sup>4</sup>

But the Lord our God did much more than just note that it is not good for us to be alone. The Lord God, in His good and gracious love for us, took action in regard to our loneliness. The Lord our God made us so that not only could and should we be in relationship with Him, but also that we could and should be in relationship with other human beings. He has given us both Himself, and other human beings, to know and to enjoy and to love. And it is precisely this good and gracious gift of relationship which is reflected in the two greatest commandments: *“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”* – the first and greatest commandment, which we looked at last Sunday. And the second greatest commandment, our subject for this morning: *“And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* Again, these commandments reflect God’s gracious goodness toward us – it is not good for us to be alone. And so He gives us Himself to know and to love; and He gives us our neighbors, our fellow human beings, for the very same reason.

*“But who is my neighbor?”* the lawyer asks Jesus. *“Who is the one, are the ones, I am to love?”* Now Jesus has a very specific answer to that question in the parable which follows – and we’ll get to that answer. But the answer Jesus gives in that parable to the question of “Who is my neighbor I am to love” is not the only answer the Bible as a whole gives to that question. In fact, the very first answer to that question of “Who is my neighbor I am to love” comes immediately following God’s observation that it is not good for Adam to be alone in the Garden – God creates Eve.<sup>5</sup> And Adam is not only grateful, he is blown away. As soon as he sees Eve he cries out, *“Woo! Man!”* – which is why she is called “woman.” Okay, maybe that is not exactly how it happened. But the story ends with this divine instruction: *“Therefore a man shall leave his father*

*and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.*”<sup>6</sup> The first God-given answer to our loneliness, the first neighbor we are commanded to love, is found in the God created and blessed covenant of marriage.

Now there are currently a lot of really bad ideas out there about marriage and what marriage is for – so we do well to come back to God’s intention of what our marriages are for. Bad ideas like marriage is a path to self-fulfillment, or marriage is about finding happiness ever after, or marriage is about having my needs met, and so on. Note something about each of those bad ideas – they are all basically selfish, all essentially focused on “me” and not on “we.” God’s definition of marriage is profoundly not about “me,” but “we” as in husband and wife and also God’s blessing and helping them in their marriage. For how can our marriages ever fulfill God’s intention that we should become one flesh without God’s blessing and presence and help in our marriages?

In other words, again, the first neighbor we are commanded to love in the second great commandment is the one with whom we have entered into the covenant of marriage before God and our family and friends. Which means that marriage is to be understood as a school in which we are learning how to love that neighbor who shares our home and our heart. Indeed, marriage is one of the best schools for learning not only how to love, but also how to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ in all our relationships. But again, and this is critical – we can only do this with the help of the God who perfectly loves both husband and wife. As my teacher, Dr. Elizabeth Achtemeier once put it:

*. . . He works in our marriages and homes beyond all our power to work and to make them whole.*

*When we have no more power in our marriage to forgive, Christ can heal our conflict. When we are at our selfish, unlovable worst, he nevertheless can sustain our love for one another. When we are most weak and tempted by the siren song of our sinful society, he can hold the bonds of faithfulness firm by his unswerving devotion. And out of all that loving care with which Christ works in our wedded unions, there can in fact be forged a home life together against which the very powers of hell cannot prevail, and which lasts and lasts till death do us part, in joy and fidelity and goodness.<sup>7</sup>*

“*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” And if we keep reading on in the Creation story, we quickly learn that neighbor number two God gives us to love and to be loved by is our family. Adam and Eve beget Cain and Abel<sup>8</sup>, and the family only grows from there – sons and daughters, grandmothers and grandfathers, uncles and aunts and cousins and even the in-laws who are joined in. Family. The second neighbor we are to love are those with whom we share the bond of kinship. Through our families we are given even more neighbors to love, and who love us in return. And through our families we learn how to love. For it is only in learning to love the same old people for a long, long time that we ever begin to comprehend what it means that we are loved by God forever. And it is only through loving one another through the inevitable ups and downs of family life that we come to grasp what it means that God has chosen to forgive us and to hold on to us come what may. May God bless our life in families!

And so, as with marriage, our families are also schools of love – meaning that life in family, loving those people with whom we share the bonds of blood and kinship, is not always going to be easy, and that we shouldn't expect it to be. Indeed, I love that the Bible is so honest about life in families – remember what happens between Cain and Abel<sup>9</sup>, or between Jacob and his father-in-law Laban<sup>10</sup>, or for that matter between Jacob and his father<sup>11</sup>, Jacob and his brother Esau<sup>12</sup>, Jacob and Leah and Rachel<sup>13</sup>. You want to talk about dysfunctional families, there it is – right there in the Bible. But what we also see is God at work in these families – at work in them even at their most troubled. Remember that incredibly moving scene when Jacob is at last reunited and reconciled with his brother Esau whom he had wronged – the two grown men weeping on each other's shoulders as they embrace.<sup>14</sup> We see God at work in these flawed Biblical families – and so can be certain that God is at work even in the messiness of our own. Helping us to love one another. Teaching us how to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Presbyterian pastor Michael Lindvall tells a story that illustrates this. Larry and Sherry are a couple with two small children and a new baby. One day, in the middle of August, Larry's parents, Angus and Minnie, come for a visit. All goes well for a few days, but then the baby comes down with the chicken pox. Larry and Angus decide the best thing they can do for the situation is to get out of the house, so they go bowling, leaving the children with Sherry and her mother-in-law Minnie. But as soon as Larry and Angus leave, the air-conditioner breaks, adding to the misery. When Angus and Larry come home, several sweltering, miserable hours later, Larry's first words to an exasperated Sherry are, *"If I'd know that the thing was going to bust, we would have never gone, honey."*<sup>15</sup> Somehow, that doesn't seem to make things better.

The repair job on the air conditioner requires entering a crawl space beneath the kitchen. Larry climbs in and begins working. There is a moment of silence, and then out of the blue Minnie turns to her daughter-in-law and says, *"Sherry, it's really a good thing that you didn't lose that weight [after the baby was born], or Larry might have had you crawl in there."*<sup>16</sup>

Three days later, the pastor is dispatched to Sherry's parents' house, where Sherry has been for the last three days, to see if maybe Sherry is willing to come back home yet. Sherry tells the minister: *"Something snapped, Dave. It had never crossed my mind to walk out on them . . . But it was just so much, just so much . . ."* As it turns out, they all learn a lesson about life in families, and Sherry is only too glad to come back home. And then the story ends with these wonderful words:

*Life together is hard. There are no perfect husbands, no perfect wives, no perfect children, no perfect mothers-in-law. Life in family – life in any community – is both our sorest test and our sweetest joy. Life together stretches us, pulls us, strains us, but in it we are nourished by the struggle itself.*

*It is the best chance Providence gives most of us to grow out of ourselves and into something more like what we are meant to be. Life together is the welcome tether that kindly but relentlessly binds our ravenous egos. Life together is where most people get their only chance to be heroes. Families can breed heroes – local heroes, yes, but giants of spirit nevertheless: courageous and well-tempered*

*souls who return again and again to brave the rigors and savor the delicacies of loving the same people for a long time. For the only thing harder than getting along with other people is getting along without them . . .*<sup>17</sup>

*“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* Well, I’m running out of time and I am nowhere near the end of the list of neighbors God has so graciously given to us to love and to be loved by. Friends – what a wonderful gift to have a true friend. In the Bible, the friendship between Jonathan, the son of King Saul, and David, the one who has been chosen to replace Saul as king, is a beautiful story. They should have been rivals, mortal enemies – but instead they are friends.<sup>18</sup> Jonathan sacrifices everything to protect his friend David.<sup>19</sup> And David repays that friendship by his own kindness later in life to Jonathan’s sole surviving son, a man named Mephibosheth.<sup>20</sup> Friends, like families, are glorious gifts of God. And learning to be a friend to another is, like marriage and family life, one of the best ways we learn how to love our neighbor as ourselves. In this time of harried lives and pseudo friendships existing only in cyberspace, never has it been more important for us to put in the work, put in the time, put in the real-world face to face presence which alone builds and maintains lasting friendships.

*“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* And next, and let us never take this for granted, God also gives us as neighbors to love and to be loved by the spiritual fellowship of the church – our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, friends in faith. The beauty and importance of the relationships we form here within the walls of this church is a whole other sermon unto itself. But let this suffice for this morning: Paul, in his letter to the Philippian church, writes to the Christians there, *“I thank God in all my remembrances of you.”*<sup>21</sup> One preacher suggests we should make that verse into a little exercise. We should take a sheet of paper, write that verse at the top, and then write upon it all the names of all the persons whose love we are thankful for, all those whom we love and gratefully name in love. And then, he suggests, when our life is over, the last thing we should do is grab that list and take it with us as we ascend to the Gates of Heaven to meet St. Peter:

*When you get to the gate, St. Peter’s going to say, “Now look, you went into the world with nothing, you’ve got to come out of it with nothing. Now what’ve you got?”*

*And you’ll say, “Well, it’s just some names.”*

*“Well, let me see it.”*

*“It’s just some names of folks I worked with and folks who helped me . . . This is just a group of people that, if it weren’t for them, I’d never have made it.”*

*He’ll say, “I want to see it.” And you’ll give it to him, and he’ll smile and say, “I know all of them. In fact, on my way here to the gate I passed a group. They were painting a great big sign to hang over the street. And it said, ‘Welcome Home.’”*<sup>22</sup>

Let us never take for granted what we have been given here at this church, this special spiritual family. Our spiritual home, where we are always welcomed in, until that day when we enter into

our heavenly home. In the church – this great, great blessing – we are given neighbors to love, neighbors to learn how to love in Christ.

And then, last, is the specific answer Jesus gives to the lawyer’s question, “*Who is my neighbor?*” Jesus tells him, by way of an answer, the parable of the Good Samaritan. So much of the shock value of this parable is lost to us today – but it would have been truly shocking and upsetting to those who heard Jesus tell it. For the hero of the story is not a good, God-fearing Jew, but a Samaritan – a member of a people that the Jews considered to be unclean, unwelcome, and beneath contempt. But it is the Samaritan alone who stops to help the man beaten, robbed, and left by the side of the road. Jesus then ends the parable by asking the lawyer, “*Which of the three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?*” The lawyer answers correctly, “*The man who showed him mercy.*” And Jesus replies, “*You go, and do likewise.*” “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*”

In other words, the last neighbor we are commanded to love is anybody and everybody – without limits, without restrictions, without prejudice or bias or distinction. We, like that lawyer, want the world divided up into “us” and “them.” What Jesus is telling us in this parable is that when it comes to who is the neighbor we are commanded to love, there is only “us” – there is no longer any such thing as “them.” Because we are all, each and every person on the face of this earth, loved by our God – and, therefore, each and every person we meet is, in the end, our neighbor, someone Jesus wants us to love. And even to help.

Which calls to mind one of my favorite Hasidic Jewish stories. An ancient Rabbi once asked his pupils how they could discern the moment when the night had ended and the day had begun. One student answered, “*Could it be when you see an animal in the distance and can tell whether it is a sheep or a dog?*” “*No,*” said the Rabbi. Another student said, “*Could it be when you look at a tree in the distance and can tell whether it is a fig tree or a peach tree?*” “*No,*” said the Rabbi. “*Then when is it?,*” asked the students. “*It is,*” said the Rabbi, “*the moment when you can look in the face of any man and recognize him as your brother. Because until you can do this, then no matter what time it is, it is still night.*”<sup>23</sup>

“*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” Because it is truly not good, it is truly not healthy, and it is truly never God’s plan that anyone should ever be alone.

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<sup>1</sup> [Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation](#).

<sup>2</sup> “Our Epidemic,” p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> “Our Epidemic,” p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 2:18.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 2:19-23.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 2:24.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Achtemeier, [Preaching about Family Relationships](#) (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), pp. 76-77.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 4:1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 4:3-16.

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 29:1-30.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 27.

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 27.

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 29:30 – 30:24.

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- <sup>14</sup> Genesis 33:1-20.
- <sup>15</sup> Michael Lindvall, "Sherry Moves Home for a While," in The Good News from North Haven (New York: Doubleday, 1991), p. 107.
- <sup>16</sup> Lindvall, p. 108.
- <sup>17</sup> Lindvall, pp. 108-109.
- <sup>18</sup> I Samuel 18:1-5.
- <sup>19</sup> See I Samuel 19-20.
- <sup>20</sup> II Samuel 9:1-13.
- <sup>21</sup> Philippians 1:3.
- <sup>22</sup> Fred Craddock, Craddock Stories (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), pp. 152-153.
- <sup>23</sup> Quoted in Johann Christoph Arnold, Seeking Peace (Farmington, Pa.: The Plough Publishing House, 1998), p. 85.