

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, August 4, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

## “OUR MERCIFUL NEIGHBOUR”

Luke 10:25-37

Many people today say that they don't really know their neighbours. We don't have as much in common with our neighbours as we did in previous generations. Sometimes there are language and cultural and religious barriers. But over time you can get to know your neighbours. On one side of our home we have a Muslim family, and on the other side a Chinese family. Certainly we're friendly with both families and know a bit about what's going on in their lives. We have worked together on property maintenance. We've dog sat and watered plants and watched out for one another's homes when we're on vacation. Both have been proven to be good neighbours to us and I hope we have been good neighbours to them.

After he told his famous parable which we read in Luke 10, Jesus asked his questioner, “Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?” The man said, “The one who showed mercy on him.” (Luke 10:36,37). Let me tell you of the one who has proven himself to be good neighbour to all of us, indeed to the whole world. Who is our neighbour? His name is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ proves to be our merciful neighbour.

Well, the story is well known. An expert in the law stood up to put Jesus to the test. He knew, as Jesus affirmed, that the way to eternal life is to love God with your whole being and to love your neighbour as yourself. But he desired to justify himself, and asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” Now it was important to know who your neighbour was. Of course, for a Jewish man such as this, the neighbour would include his fellow country men. You loved them because they are like you. They share your blood. But surely foreigners are not neighbours to be loved. Surely long-time enemies and religious antagonists like half-breed Samaritans are not neighbours to be loved, are they? Surely not. This lawyer already had a pretty clear idea of who the neighbour was. And he wanted Jesus to justify his definition.

So Jesus told this story. A man, presumably a Jewish man, was going down the dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Robbers jumped out from behind a rock, stripped him, beat him and left him for half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite also saw him and passed by on the other side. No surprise in either case really, because that was a very dangerous road. One did not stop on that road, no more than you would stop to help someone with a flat tire on the 401. But then a Samaritan came along. Those listening to the story would have thought to themselves, “Here comes the final blow.” From experience they expected the worst from Samaritans. But against all their expectations, the Samaritan saw the man, and had compassion on him. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then set the wounded man on his own beast and brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and told him to take care of him. And he promised to stop in on his way

back to repay whatever extra was spent on the beaten man's care. Jesus asked, "Which of the three proved neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?" The answer was obvious. "The one who showed mercy on him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Now Jesus really didn't answer the lawyer's question. Jesus said in effect, "Don't be concerned about defining who your neighbour is. Go and be like the Samaritan. Go and be neighbour to someone who needs your mercy." And even more – "Go and be a neighbour to someone who doesn't expect you to be a neighbour – be a neighbour even to your enemy." In our world today, it could be like a Palestinian woman dragging a wounded Israeli soldier out of a burning house. Or if President Trump welcomed a border jumping immigrant to the Trump Tower, put that person and his family up not just for a night, but for years, and personally paid for all their needs. And you never know – he might. He's full of surprises. Or a Sri Lankan Muslim binding up the wounds of a Catholic hurt in the Easter bombing. Or you shovelling snow or bringing a meal for a cranky neighbour you don't get along with, when that person falls ill. This is what Jesus is saying when he says, "Go and do likewise." "Go and be a merciful neighbour to someone who doesn't expect you to be a neighbour."

But the early church fathers saw that there's more to Jesus' parable than moral instruction, important as that may be. This is about more than "Go and do."

Insight into who our neighbour is comes from seeing ourselves as the beaten and wounded person on the road to Jericho. You see, the road we walk in life is filled with dangers and snares. Yes, we encounter neighbours along the road, even unexpected neighbours who show us mercy, but there are others who are not neighbours to us at all. There are robbers along our path, powers and principalities and yes, people who take advantage of us. We fall into their hands. They beat us, strip us, rob us of both our money and our dignity. Sometimes we fall into their hands because of our own sin and foolishness. And sometimes it happens because of their sinful acts. I think of those telephone and internet scammers who are about as far away from being good neighbours you can imagine. They trip us up, rob us, and strip us of our dignity when and if we fall for their slick and shady schemes. Sin, both our own sin and the sinful things that are done to us leave us half dead. "The wages of sin is death." The road of life is dangerous and we all get wounded along the way.

Then there are people who pass us by for one reason or another. We ourselves sometimes pass by those who need mercy. If entering heaven depends on me being a merciful neighbour to every wounded person I meet along life's road, then I am lost. I have been neighbour to some, but not to all. I have passed by. I have not always "gone and done likewise." Likely it's the same for you, too. Certainly I haven't always loved God with my whole being and my neighbour as I love myself. The fact is that we are all broken and wounded and sinful people. We all need mercy, lots of it. We all need a merciful neighbour. And who might that be? Why none other than Christ Jesus himself. Jesus Christ proves to be our merciful neighbour. He is the neighbour we all need. He is your merciful neighbour and mine.

God sent his only Son to walk the treacherous road of life with us and for us. His whole life was devoted to showing forth God's mercy and love, and proclaiming the truth about God and His Kingdom. He showed mercy to whoever called upon him - Jew, Gentile, even a Samaritan

woman, who didn't expect him to be a merciful neighbour. To Jesus there were no distinctions. Human need was the only calling. Yet powerful people and those who insisted on restricting the definition of neighbour didn't like it. They stripped him, beat him, left him to die on a cross. Who would imagine a crucified, rejected, despised man as the merciful neighbour that we all need. Yet he is, for the Father raised him on the third day to be alive forevermore. "Which one proved to be neighbour?" The One the world despised and rejected turns out to be the Good Neighbour. The Crucified and Risen One proves to be our merciful neighbour. Jesus Christ is God's Good Samaritan to a fallen world and broken humanity. He is the source of salvation for God's creation. He is the light and the hope of the world. He is Lord and God. By his wounds our very souls are healed. He is the giver of new and eternal life. He is our rock, our refuge, our strength. He brings us divine grace and forgiveness. He himself paid the cost of our salvation, and that cost was the sacrifice of his own sinless body on Calvary's cross. And when our earthly days are ended he will come as he has promised and take us in his loving arms to the Father's house.

Jesus Christ proves to be our merciful neighbour. The Crucified and Risen Christ draws near to us on the rocky and dangerous road. He sees us where we are and does not pass by. Even today he has come our way and stopped here to be with us. He is ministering to us right now with great compassion, to you and me according to our individual need. He is feeding us with living bread at his table. He is binding up your wounds and mine. He is refreshing your soul and strengthening your faith in him. He is making your burden his burden and giving you peace and assurance, and rest for your soul. Jesus Christ is proving to be your merciful neighbour in these very moments.

Sometimes he shows mercy to us on life's rocky road through compassionate people who minister to us. That's why Christ says to us, "Don't try to define the neighbour. Instead be a good neighbour to those whom you meet along the road of life. You don't need to be perfect at it. There may be times you can stop, and times when you don't or you can't. Your hope of heaven doesn't depend on always getting it right. By my cross and resurrection, I am your hope of heaven. But if you have received mercy through me, the Risen Christ, then you may find yourself stopping and showing mercy to others, sometimes at least, perhaps more often than you think."

An Archbishop once told about visiting a church service where the singing was wonderful, the sermon was inspiring, the prayers were splendid. As the congregation was leaving, there was a woman unkempt and weeping, sitting by the church fence. Only one of the worshipers paid any attention to her. She went over and knelt down beside the woman and sought to comfort her. The archbishop said that was the most impressive part of the worship service that day.

Someone once wrote - "I can almost hear that broken man lying there on the road to Jericho looking up into the face of this Samaritan and whispering, "Mister, are you God?" In a sense he was. Christ was working in and through the merciful Samaritan.

Jesus Christ proves to be our merciful neighbour. With great compassion the crucified and risen One stoops down to bind up our wounds. He invites you and me to trust him fully and to become as he is. And in the power of the Holy Spirit he sends us forth, "Go and do likewise."