

## **Sermon - Travel Stories: *The Neighbor* - wk 1**

First Presbyterian Church of Newton, KS - July 12, 2020

Luke 10:25-37 *The Message* paraphrase

(Adapted from Eugene Peterson's book *Tell it Slant*)

We're beginning a new message series today and we're going to look at the words of Jesus. We're going to look at the parables and lessons Jesus' told, while walking along and participating in the common things of life. Through His conversations, we will learn important truths He wants us to know for living a full and abundant life. As a main resource for this series, I'll be drawing from Eugene Peterson's book *Tell it Slant*.

Now let me say, why I want to look at Jesus' conversations. I often hear people put a premium on the words of Jesus above other parts of the Bible. For good reason, as Jesus followers, we want to know what He said. As Jesus' adopted brothers and sisters, we want to know the Kingdom hope and the Kingdom values we've been adopted into. Therefore, in this series we're going to look at "what Jesus said" by looking at His travel stories. Jesus tells ten stories, while walking from Galilee to Jerusalem. Again, to help us in our study, again we will have a helpful companion in the scholar, professor, pastor and author Eugene Peterson.

The story we're considering today is in Luke 10 and is provoked by a conversation with an unnamed person who

is identified only by his work as a lawyer, a *nomikos*. A professional not in secular law but in God's law, the law of Moses, the Torah. A more accurate designation today might be "religion professor" or "Bible scholar."

Jesus was about to be tested by this Bible scholar. And as the test is conducted, Eugene Peterson points out the way Jesus responds: He's not proclaiming, not interpreting, but conversing. It's a respectful give-and-take with the Bible scholar. It's neither confrontational, nor condescending. A conversation that invites (and gets) participation.

Eugene Peterson points out Five Segments to the conversation.

Segment 1. The Bible scholar asks his test question, **"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"** Maybe this is his standard test question, one that he asks every religion teacher who is a stranger. It is not a bad question. All of us want to live something more than an animal existence, to get the most out of life, and it is in "getting this most" out of life that our character and values show themselves. The way we go about living tells a lot about our wisdom and our motives and our character and our goodness.

Jesus answers his question by asking a question, **"What's written in God's Law? How do you interpret it?"**

Jesus question invites a conversation, thus moving it from a test to a relationship. It's congenial. Did the Bible scholar begin this conversation with a policing the religious scene desire? If so, it is gone now. If that was his intent,

the tables are turned. Jesus' question levels the playing field. That is segment 1: the question and the leveling of the playing field.

Segment 2. The Bible scholar answers Jesus' question by summarizing the law of Moses in the classic style: **love God and love your neighbor** - a meld of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. It's not an original answer, but it is accurate. Jesus gives him a good grade, "**Good answer! Do it and you will live.**"

The most notable feature in this segment is that the positions of the scholar and Jesus are reversed. In the course of testing Jesus, the Bible scholar finds himself no longer administering the test but personally involved in the test. In the act of testing Jesus he finds himself being tested by Jesus. The result of the public examination: Jesus passes. Actually, they both pass. They are now on equal footing, both orthodox and competent in teaching the way of God.

Segment 3. The scholar, instead of feeling relaxed and companionable with Jesus as we might expect, asks another question: "**And just how would you define 'neighbor'?**"

Luke ascribes a motive this time to the Bible scholar's question. The motive: "**wanting to justify himself**" (NRSV). The scholar is feeling uneasy. He's probably "**looking for a loophole**" to loving neighbor.

Eugene Peterson writes, "There is nothing wrong with his knowledge or thought processes. He knows the Torah thoroughly and can quote it accurately. There is nothing wrong with his professional competence. We have observed that he conducts his examination of Jesus with considerable skill. If he thinks well and works well, what is left? Well, maybe the way he is, the way he lives, the way he loves. Maybe his heart is atrophied."

He is uncomfortable being on a par with Jesus; he wants to be in charge of Jesus. Has he been doing this all his life - leading Bible studies, asking probing questions, upholding the truth of Scripture, fulfilling religious functions - and never been found out? But Jesus finds him out. And it is a parable that does it, in this appropriately famous story commonly called "The Good Samaritan."

The story is told on a Samaritan road, but it is told to a Jewish religious professional. And it is most likely overheard by other Jews who are accompanying Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. There must have been quite a crowd of them - how many besides the seventy-two who had been sent on the mission? We can imagine a substantial gathering of Galilean Jews traveling through unfriendly Samaritan country with Jesus.

The significance of the setting is clarified by three observations. First, Jesus tells his story to a man whom his Jewish listeners would think of as a good Jew. Second, the story features a man who in the Jewish

imagination of that day would be stereotyped as a bad Samaritan. Third, the story itself is set not on the Samaritan road on which they were walking but many miles south on the Jericho road out of Jerusalem, a road in Jewish territory. A good Jewish scholar, a good Jewish road, a “bad” Samaritan in Jewish territory.

Jesus creates the story. A man is walking from Jerusalem to Jericho. It is a long walk seventeen miles descending 3,300 feet through wilderness badlands to the fertile Jordan plain. The road twists and turns through canyons with caves and is a road famous for robberies and murder.

Jesus does not make the ethnic identity of the man known, but given the context we assume he is a Jew. He is beat up by men who take everything he has, literally the clothes off his back. They beat him nearly to death, and leave him for the vultures to finish off. It happens all the time even now, on city streets and country roads all over the world. Luckily, just then a priest comes by. But the luck is short-lived. The priest can't be bothered with him. Then a Levite comes by - another chance to be rescued! But he fares no better at the hands of the Levite. The man is three times forsaken - by the robbers, the priest, and now the Levite.

Given the conversation just recorded between the Bible scholar and Jesus, we can't help assuming that the priest and the Levite also know that double command that the Bible scholar has just recited, and know it just as well as

he does. **Love God and love your neighbor.** The three men, priest and Levite and Bible scholar, are fellow professionals in matters of Torah. They are responsible for keeping the law of Moses regarding God and neighbor remembered in the Jewish community.

Just then a Samaritan shows up and takes care of the robbed and beaten man, and not in a pick him up and dust him off way. He disinfects the man's wounds, anoints them with healing oil, bandages him up, puts him on his donkey, takes him to an inn, and pays the innkeeper to take care of him until he's well. A Samaritan, the stereotypical bad person in the Jewish imagination of the time, is the one who loves his Jewish "neighbor."

A simple story, conversationally told while walking through Samaritan country.

Segment 4. The entire conversation between Jesus and the Bible scholar turns on questions. First the Bible scholar's question, "**Teacher, what do I need to do to get eternal life?**" Then Jesus' question, "**What's written in God's Law? How do you interpret it?**" And now a third and final question by Jesus, "**What do you think? Which of the three became a neighbor to the man attacked by robbers?**"

The Bible scholar, not Jesus, provides the conclusion to the story: "**The man who showed him mercy.**" Note what happens: Jesus' story did not define the neighbor. It

created a neighbor where there wasn't thought to be one. Jesus' story puts an end to all variations on the question, "**Who is my neighbor?**" From that time to now, the question is, "**Will I be a neighbor?**"

Segment 5. The main leading word in this conversation is a verb in the imperative, thereby, it's a command: "love." That love command, although not repeated, reverberates continuously through the conversation.

Eugene Peterson writes, "Love" as a noun is a huge and complex subject. Philosophers and theologians write thousands upon thousands of pages exploring its cultural expressions, its emotional intricacies, its psychological nuances. But there is surprisingly little of that sort of thing in our Scriptures. Love is not a subject to be discussed by our prophets and priests, our apostles and pastors, our praying poets and our wise sages. The word is used as a noun often enough, but most significantly in our Scriptures it is as a verb where it springs into life. Not "**God is love**" but the verb "**God so loved the world....**"

Eugene Peterson continues, "The moment the noun 'love' becomes a verb it ceases to be a subject to be discussed or understood or explored. It enters our lives. And when the verb is spoken in the imperative, it comes to life in an act of obedience."

Jesus speaks the final and definitive words in this story as commands, they are commands: "**go...do.**" No more

questions. No more answers. No more religious talk. Go and love. No more detached and impersonal discussions of Scriptural interpretation, no more using religion (or Jesus!) as a way to avoid or dismiss the actual men and women who are in our lives. Something is going on, and we are told that we can get in on it. No, we are in fact commanded, “**Get in on it!**”

Stories do that: in stories we leave the world of impersonal discussions and know we need to follow the imperative to fully participate in life. “Get in on it!” “Go and do.” In response to this story we must be obedient to Jesus command to be neighbors to everyone we meet on our way as we follow Jesus. And good news, His Holy Spirit helps us do it with the fruit of the Spirit.

Finally. You might be curious. Did the Bible scholar become a neighbor and “**go and do**” the love command that he knew so well? We don’t get an answer to that question. We only get to know our own responses and our own stories. **Love God and love your neighbor** - Don’t sit around waiting and watching, it’s a command - *Get in on it!* It’s God’s plan for a full life.

Would you pray with me?

Dear God,  
We ask you to mend relationships among people in our midst. *Bring to our minds our relationships that need this attention.*



We ask you to mend relationships among all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues. *Bring to our minds our relationships that need this attention.*

We ask you to mend relationships in your church around the world. *Bring to our minds our relationships that need this attention.*

Help us to be a good neighbor where the world would have us be indifferent or worse, an enemy.

In Jesus Name, Amen.