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Westminster Presbyterian Church
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“Who Is My Neighbor?”

Luke 10:25-37

We all saw the photograph.
We were all stunned by the photograph—
the photograph we saw on television,
on our computers,
on our phones,
in our newspapers.

A photograph of a 25-year-old man
and his daughter,
a little girl not even 2 years old,
the two of them lifeless,
their bodies floating in water;
face down,
caught in the rushes on the banks of the Rio Grande River,
the little girl’s arm around her father’s neck,
still hanging on.

The father had tried to swim across the Rio Grande,
with his daughter on his back;
He had tried to cross from Mexico to the US.
He’d made it across most of the river,
but exhausted,
he succumbed to the currents,
he and his daughter.
The man’s wife, the little girl’s mother,
watched helplessly as the river carried them away.

The father, mother, and daughter
had journeyed with other family members
from their home in El Salvador,
a country in Central America
many of us might struggle to find on the map.
They’d traveled north,
first through Guatemala
and then through Mexico,
a journey of hundreds and hundreds of miles,
toward what they hoped would be a better life,

a life in this country, our country.

The words of the poet Emma Lazarus
 may have been unknown to them,
 but still, the sentiment in her words,
 the promise, the hope, drew them:
 “Give me your tired, your poor,
 Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
 The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me.”

There’s no one who questions the fact
 that they were trying to enter the country illegally.
 In swimming across the river,
 the father and his family
 tried to swim around the border,
 swim around our country’s laws.

For some in our country,
 that was enough for them to react
 with harsh, judgmental voices:
 “If they hadn’t tried to do something illegal,”
 they said, “they might still be alive.”

It certainly wasn’t the first time someone died
 trying to enter our country illegally.
 And it certainly won’t be the last time.

What are we to do, you and I?
 How are we to react, each of us, all of us?
 Not as red, blue, purple Americans,
 but as disciples of Jesus Christ,
 followers of Christ,
 our first, our primary allegiance.

Today’s gospel text helps us, guides us;
 I think it even gives us an answer.
 It is the story, the familiar story,
 of the Good Samaritan,
 the parable that Luke gives us.

Read the text,
 listen to the text - as we will in a moment -
 and we must conclude that
 even as we might label them “illegal immigrants”
 under our system of laws,
 that father, that little girl,
 the next person who dies:
 they were and are all our neighbors!

We did not know them,
 but that doesn't matter:
 they were our neighbors.

They came from a foreign country,
 a country we might know nothing about.
 But that doesn't matter:
 they were our neighbors.

The very essence of the story of the Good Samaritan
 is that we followers of Jesus Christ
 are called to live by the two great commandments,
 teaching we find in both Old and New Testaments,
 that we are to love the Lord our God
with all our heart,
and with all our soul,
and with all our strength,
and with all our mind;
 and we are to love our neighbors as ourselves.

And, for Jesus, the definition of “neighbor”
 is expansive,
 all encompassing,
 all inclusive.

In the text, Jesus is asked such a simple question:
 After he reminds his listeners
 of the Scriptural text found in Leviticus
 that God calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves:
 Jesus is asked, “Who is my neighbor”?

It is a lawyer who asks the question,

so we might think Jesus would have answered
with lawyerly precision:

“Your neighbor is anyone who lives within
a proximate distance to your domicile,
particularly a member of your tribe, your race, or your culture.”

Precise, sharply delineated,
neat, easy to understand.
How easy then it would be
to go around pointing here,
“this person is my neighbor”
and pointing there,
“this person is not my neighbor.”

That’s not of course, what Jesus does.
Instead, Jesus tells a parable, a story.
Listen now to God’s word to us from Luke’s gospel:

*Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.
“Teacher,” he said,
“what must I do to inherit eternal life?”
[Jesus] said to him, “What is written in the law?
What do you read there?”
[The lawyer] 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 neighbor as yourself.”
And [Jesus] said to him,
“You have given the right answer;
do this, and you will live.”
But wanting to justify himself,
[the lawyer] asked Jesus,
“And who is my neighbor?”
Jesus 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.
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,
 when he came to the place and saw him,
 passed by on the other side.
 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him;
 and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.
 He 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.
 The 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.'*

*"Which of these three, do you think,
 was a neighbor to the man
 who fell into the hands of the robbers?"
 [The lawyer] said, "The one who showed him mercy."
 Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."*

Do you hear what Jesus is doing?
 he's not defining the term "neighbor" for the lawyer,
 not defining it with the precision,
 the boundaries, the lawyer hoped for.
 Instead, Jesus was saying to him,
 teaching him really,
 "Rather than trying to figure out
 whether this person or that
 is your neighbor,
 figure out how you can be a neighbor to any, to all;
 someone you know,
 someone who is a stranger;
 Someone who is part of your community;
 someone, like a Samaritan,
 who is not only not a part of your community,
 but despised by your community.

BE a neighbor,

by showing mercy,
 compassion,
 kindness, goodness.
 “Go and do likewise.”
 Expansively, inclusively,
 to any, to all,
 all the men and women of this place;
 those who live here, and those passing through.

Isn't that what the texts Reed shared with us call us to do:
 be a neighbor, especially to foreigners, strangers,
 and, yes, immigrants:

Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner -
 Exodus 22:21

*When a foreigner resides among you in your land,
 do not mistreat them.
 The foreigner residing among you
 must be treated as your native-born.
 Love them as yourself -*
 Leviticus 19:33

*The community is to have the same rules
 for you and for the foreigner residing among you;
 this is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come.
 You and the foreigner shall be the same before the Lord:
 The same laws and regulations will apply
 both to you and to the foreigner residing among you.*
 Numbers 15:15

There's more:
*When you reap the harvest of your land,
 do not reap to the very edges of your field
 or gather the gleanings of your harvest.
 ...Leave them for the poor ...and the foreigner. ...the foreigner.*
 Leviticus 19:9

*The Lord your God
 defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow,
 and loves the foreigner residing among you,*

*giving them food and clothing.
And you are to love those who are foreigners...*
Deuteronomy 10:14

Don't you think God is trying to make a point here?
We are to be neighbors to all - all,
including the foreigner,
including the illegal immigrant.

Are we - you and I -
being the kind of neighbors Jesus calls us to be,
to the thousands of detained men, women, and children
who are living in filth and fear along our border,
living in what the United Nations human rights chief
last week described as "shocking, overcrowded facilities,
without access to adequate health care or food,
and with poor sanitation conditions,"
(New York Times, July 8, 2019)

Go and do likewise?

In the vestibule of our church
that opens out to Delaware Avenue
are stained glass windows that capture
what our Lord teaches us in the 25th chapter of Matthew:
*"...for I was hungry and you gave me no food,
I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,
I was a stranger and you did not welcome me,
naked and you did not give me clothing,
sick and in prison and you did not visit me."*
... *"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty
or a stranger or naked
or sick or in prison,
and did not take care of you?"*
... *"Truly I tell you,
just as you did not do it to one of the least of these,
you did not do it to me."*
(Matthew 25:42)

Truly I tell you,
you were no neighbor to me,

when you showed no mercy
to the least of these,
the weak, the stranger, the lost.

The writer Anne Lamott describes “mercy” as “radical kindness.
[It] means, she says,
“offering or being offered aid in desperate straits. ...
Mercy, grace,
forgiveness, and compassion are synonyms;
...[But] when we manage a flash of mercy....
we experience a great spiritual moment
coming from within,
coming from love.”
Coming from God.

What mercy did we show that father, that little girl?
What mercy did we show the wife and mother
grieving the loss of husband and daughter?
The fact that they were illegal immigrants,
the fact that they were strangers, foreigners—
for us, as followers of Jesus Christ,
those things don’t matter.

For you, for me, for us,
as disciples of Jesus Christ,
steely resolve doesn’t matter;
Even secure borders don’t matter.
The only thing that matters is mercy,
mercy to the friend,
mercy to the stranger.
Mercy to the neighbor,
our neighbor.

The question is not, “who is my neighbor”.
The question is,
are you being a neighbor
as the Samaritan was a neighbor?

Go and do likewise.

AMEN