

# Sermons at Christ Church

## *Be One Body In Christ, belonging To Each Other.*

**Pentecost V**

**The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer**

“And who is my neighbor?” Asked the bewildered lawyer. This lawyer had done everything right—he had kept the law. You and I can only imagine the number of times that he had read and recited the Shema—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.” He understood what the God part was, and so he asked that question, the one question we always ask ourselves—who is my neighbor? Is he/she my neighbor? Do I owe any responsibility to someone I do not know? Can I consider them—whoever that they are, my neighbor? Can I cross the road to tend, mend, heal and support?

I once visited someone in the hospital. He was an old white 78 year old man. In his room were his son and granddaughter. After greeting them and introducing myself as the Chaplain, I asked how he was doing. He responded that he was doing alright. I then asked if his minister or priest is aware that he had been admitted to the hospital. This time, his son jumped in and answered the question. “My father was raised a Roman Catholic but he hasn’t been to church since he was 18 years old.” Why? I asked. “Well, it so happened that my father had an African American friend, and he invited him to church. His friend accepted the invitation and went with him to church. However, when they arrived at church, they wouldn’t let the African American boy enter the church. My father was so shocked and appalled that he hadn’t been to church since.” Whereas the 18 year old White boy saw a neighbor and a friend in an African American boy, the adults who turned the African American boy away from church didn’t see a neighbor, they saw their own limitations.

This place, this holy sanctuary, is a sanctuary because of the relief that it offers to wandering souls. The sense of purpose that it offers. The character that it builds. The nurturing that it pursues. The hope that it offers. The peace that it offers. The respite that it offers to hurting souls. Not to some, but to all. Because to all, this is the one place where we are formed to be neighbors, this is the one place where we become neighbors. Hear the lawyer again “And who is my neighbor?”

From the interaction between Jesus and the lawyer, you get the sense that the lawyer had done the God part. He knows what the God part required of him. The challenge here is, the keeping of the law had become rote, it had become a routine-there's no enthusiasm, there's no oomph, there's no excitement. He figured that there was more to the story about God than the simple rudimentary exercise of keeping the law. In fact, there's more to God than keeping the law. That is why I believe the lawyer went to Jesus with his question, what can I do to inherit eternal life? Help fill the blank space for me. In response, Jesus helps us to understand what the blank space is, there is more to God, and the more is, God requires us to reach across the road.

In the story, you hear that the priest couldn't reach across the road because he was limited by the law. He walked on the other side. The Levite also couldn't reach across the road because he was limited by the same law. He walked on the other side. What limits you? What keeps you from crossing to the other side of the road?

Hear what Jesus said "So if the Son shall set you free, you shall be free indeed." Those who are free are like the Samaritan-they can cross to the other side of the road. Those who are free are not limited by the way in which they identify themselves or the box which they check. Those who are free don't feel like they are limited in their capacity to cross the road. They are like the patient I met at the hospital. They are like the Samaritan-they are not limited by who they know.

They are not limited by tribes, ethnicities, races, color and sex. They are not limited by the neighborhood in which they live. They are not limited by their social status. They are not limited by anything-even the law. They are moved by the sheer decency of the human story. They are moved by the grace that they find in each other. They are moved by the excitement of putting a smile on the face of a kid. They are moved by the enthusiasm in doing good; in meeting the needs of the vulnerable, in fulfilling the desires and promises of the hopeless. They are moved by the joy of crossing the road to tend to another's need. They delight in the law that finds its fulfillment on love. To those people, those who are free, everyone is a neighbor, and so they don't ask who is my neighbor? They ask, how may I help?

At our last Vestry meeting, we voted to sponsor the father and son of our refugee family. The father and son managed to flee Afghanistan and are presently in Pakistan. We don't know the family. But we are not limited by what we don't know, we are motivated by the expansiveness of what we can do. We are excited about the joy of our neighbor.

Each year we support the children of Lake Elkhorn Middle School with school supplies. We don't know those children nor are they members of our parish. But we are not limited by what we don't know. We are motivated by the desire to cross the road to tend, mend and to support our neighbor.

Like the beaten man, we are all in a ditch of some sorts. We may be the lawyer whose ditch is one of wondering who is neighbor is. We may be the robbers whose ditch is one of taking from the vulnerable and supporting systems of inequality. We may be the priest or the Levite for whom mercy towards another was not the measure of the law.

We may be the half-dead man lying in serious pain, having lost everything and are at the point where we wish that death would come early enough or that someone like the Samaritan, who is free, would come along, draw ever so close, feel our pain, wipe our tears away, clean our wounds with oil, put us on a donkey, take us to an inn and assure us that all will be alright. .

We may also be like the innkeeper whose ditch is one of taking care of the half-dead man with his own resources with the hope that the Samaritan would return someday to reimburse him for all his trouble. This is love in action, one that goes beyond the extra mile. One that crosses to the other side of the road. One that believes that there's more to life than any limitation that we place on ourselves. Which is your ditch?

There were two ways in which people could be identified during Jesus' time: either by speech or clothing. In this story the man was stripped and half dead, which means no one could readily identify who he was by either his dialect or clothing. He was simply a human being devoid of any category, ethnicity, background or social stature. All had been stripped away. We only have a stricken man soaked in blood lying by the side of the road.

A point that Jesus sought to make was, value has no existence in itself. Our worth and value is derived from the other-neighbor. Value is present when through acts of conscious love we actualize the essence of another-the neighbor. Value cannot be present when our blindness to norms limits our freedom to act in mercy to the neighbor.

The Samaritan believed that if he had any value at all, his value was also determined by the stricken man lying by the side of the road. And so with what he had, he proffered value unto himself by offering value, dignity and worth to the stricken man. More importantly, his actions portray someone who believed that man was the measure of the law. For him, man, any man, any woman was his neighbor.

Yes, we are all in a ditch. And it is possible that we may not get all things right and sometimes our best efforts may not yield the desired results. But we can never go wrong in showing mercy, we can never go wrong in showing compassion, we can never go wrong in tending, mending and healing a neighbor-whoever that neighbor may be.

Are you free? Free enough to cross the road to the other side where lies stricken men and women dealing with the hurt and pain of the injustice, racism, poverty and discrimination? Are you free to cross the road or you are blinded by your own limitations so you can neither tend, mend, heal nor support because you don't know who your neighbor is? Are you free enough to break down those barriers that diminish you?

The era of Christ must be understood, not as a time without the law, but as the time of the law's perfect fulfillment in compassion, mercy and love. I challenge you, today and always to dare to cross to the other side of the road. That is where human redemption lies. That is what it means to go and do likewise. Amen.

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