



First United Church of Oak Park

There Are No Dumb Questions

Luke 10: 25-37

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July 10, 2022

I remember acting this story out in Vacation Bible School as a child. The moral of the story? Be kind and helpful. That's a fine lesson, but does not scratch the surface of what's actually going on in this story. A lawyer is asking Jesus questions, just waiting for a chance to say, "gotcha!" It was a test. The lawyer already knew the answer to his question. Did he think Jesus was a fake? Was he jealous of him? Did he just like to feel like the smartest guy in the room? I don't know, but for whatever reason he was trying to test Jesus. The Greek verb translated here to "test" is only seen in the Gospel of Luke one other time. It's when the devil was trying to convince Jesus to jump from a height and see if God would send angels to catch him before he died on the rocks below. Jesus replies, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." So, this guy's only company in the Gospel of Luke is the devil, it would seem.

The saying goes, "there are no dumb questions," but these questions were asked with ill intent by someone who already had the answers. And the lawyer asked it in order to justify himself, the text says. He wanted to prove himself innocent and righteous. Asking a question in order to vindicate yourself from having to help someone is... dumb.

This man was a lawyer—he knew and kept and enforced Jewish law. He was among the religious elite. He and the priests and the Levites ran in the same crowd. They were the good guys working for the good of the people.

Samaritans were the bad guys. They were Jews, but used only the Pentateuch or what we know as the first five Books of the Bible, while the Jews of Jerusalem had additional texts. The Samaritans rejected Jerusalem as the holy city since it is not a part of the Pentateuch and since Samaritans were descendants of Assyrians that intermarried with Jews in what was the northern kingdom of Israel that did not include Jerusalem. These were fellow Israelites, fellow Jews, and yet they were considered "not real Jews" by Jesus' audience for this parable. Jesus used their disdain for Samaritans to call them to a higher standard. "You're worried about who your neighbor is and is not." Even a Samaritan knows that's the wrong question. They thought Samaritans were dumb, but Jesus makes them feel like the dumb ones. When Jesus ends the story about the good priest and Levite who wouldn't even help their own while a despised Samaritan stops to help, and Jesus asks, "who was a neighbor?" the lawyer can't even bring himself to say "the Samaritan." He just says, "the one who showed mercy." He can't admit a Samaritan would be "good" and a priest and a Levite would leave a dying man on the side of

the road. Just by asking the question, “Who is my neighbor?” he’s shown himself to have lower moral and ethical standards than this Samaritan in the story.

The lawyer wanted to know who he had to help and who he could be vindicated from caring about. “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus said, “Don’t worry who your neighbor is. Worry about who you are.” Let me say that again. “Don’t worry about who your neighbor is. Worry about who you are.”

What matters is whether or not you are going to be a neighbor regardless of the cost. The Samaritan risked his safety on a dangerous road, his status by helping an enemy, and his money by paying for this Jewish man’s care.

“Who is my neighbor?” Don’t worry about who your neighbor is. Worry about who you are. So, are YOU a neighbor?

Am I a neighbor? That is the question we must ask ourselves. Now I’m not saying that you here in these pews are harboring a grudge against another religious or cultural group in the same way these folks were, but if you’re anything like me, you could still stand to ask yourself, “am I a neighbor?”

My sin is not usually that I don’t talk like a neighbor or think like a neighbor. My sin is usually not acting like a neighbor. So it is helpful to ask myself, “am I a neighbor?” Do I show up to church and talk about Jesus, or do I actually follow in the way of Jesus with my actions Monday to Saturday? Do I get on social media and post about my outrage over injustice, or do I volunteer, march, and adjust my lifestyle accordingly? When I say I care about people who are experiencing poverty do I mean I feel bad, or do I mean I actually extend care to those in need and take actual steps to combat our unjust economic system?

The lawyer asked what must I do to have eternal life and who is my neighbor. Jesus knew he wasn’t really looking for answers to those questions. That man knew the law and how to keep it better than anyone. Having all the answers to dumb questions does not make you a better person, but asking the right questions can. Are you a neighbor?