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Life in the Neighborhood (& Lawyers Looking for Loopholes in Love)

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[sermon starts with video clip]

The man in the clip is Angel Torres, and this video was taken a week ago Friday in Hartford, Connecticut. Angel is a 78-year-old man, now paralyzed from the neck down after being hit by a car. After he is hit, nine cars pass Torres, people walk by, a scooter navigates around him. And nobody stopped. Not until a police cruiser showed up on his way to another call, and the officer stopped, got out, and helped him.

You know, the name “Angel” means “Messenger” in Greek. I wonder if God is telling us something.

Let’s pray. Father we pray that You would speak to us and You would tell us something. Perhaps every man lying on the side of the road is You telling us something. And so, Lord God, we pray that You would help us to hear. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Luke 10:25

“And behold, a lawyer (an expert in the Law of Moses) stood up to put Him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

That’s an interesting question: What can you “do” to “inherit” anything? The only thing you could “do” is to kill the person you want to inherit something from. That is, to kill the person with eternal life...

Well, anyway,

(Luke 10:26)

He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And he 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.”

If you really “love your neighbor as yourself”, it means you’re just as concerned that your neighbor enjoyed his dinner as you were that you enjoyed *your* dinner, right? It means you’re just as concerned that your neighbor’s house is as nice as yours, and no one has to tell you to be concerned. It comes *naturally*. Cause you see, concern for *self* comes naturally. Honestly, I’m not sure that I’ve ever met someone in the flesh who loved his neighbor as he did himself. Certainly not me.

The lawyer says, “Love the Lord your God with all (not *some*, but *all*) your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.” And Jesus said to him: “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

I love that. Jesus is so cool: “Right, good answer! Do that, and you’ll live!”

That probably means “when you do this, you will begin living.” When you love your neighbor as yourself, *then* you will be living. That’s fascinating, for even a biologist will tell you that, in fact, this actually is life: many different entities (chemicals, cells, and organs) all serving each other ... serving all as if *all* was the *self*.

Life is a body. Life is a community of love. Life is a neighborhood of love.

So Jesus says, “Good answer. Love your neighbor as yourself. Do it and live!”

Verse 29: But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

To us, that seems like a perfectly good question: “Who’s my neighbor?” Is it just the guy who lives next door, who has the same model of tract home as me? What about folks living downtown? What about Mexicans or Iraqis? Who is my neighbor?

If you love *Iraqis* as yourself, you’ll weep just as much for every Iraqi widow or orphan as you do for American widows and orphans. That’s what the Law requires. IF ... they’re your neighbor. But maybe they’re *not* my neighbor.

What about those kids on TV? They show some kid starving and say, “for a few dollars a week, you can feed this child.” If you were starving and had a few dollars, you’d be *overjoyed* to buy yourself some food. So if you loved them as you loved yourself, you’d be overjoyed to feed them. That’s what the Law requires. IF ... they really are your neighbor. But maybe they’re not.

What about the “last and least”, whoever that is for you? Folks in Iraq, folks in prison, folks in Hades or Hell? If you loved them the way you loved yourself, you’d feel what they felt, and you’d hurt when they hurt. If you loved the last and least like that, giving like that, you’d probably end up last and least as well: last of all, servant of all, crucified for all. That’s what the Law requires. IF ... the last and the least are your neighbor. But maybe they’re not your neighbor.

Well, to justify yourself, you’d need to believe that they’re not your neighbor. If you’re into justifying yourself, you pretty much need to believe that *no one* is your neighbor. And that would be Hell, for you would be utterly alone.

But the question makes perfect sense to us: “Who’s my neighbor?”

There's a story about W.C. Fields. One day when he was old, sick, and near death, his wife unexpectedly entered his room. She found W.C. reading a Bible, which was highly unusual for Fields. She exclaimed, "W.C! I can't believe you're reading the Bible. What's gotten into you?" W.C. replied, "Lookin' for loopholes, my dear ... just lookin' for loopholes."

Why do you read the Bible? Are you lookin' for loopholes? Maybe we're all lawyers lookin' for loopholes in love. But just looking incriminates us. Just *looking* for loopholes, just asking "Who's my neighbor?", just asking "Who do I have to love?" means I probably don't even understand love.

I mean, some questions are already the wrong answer:

"Who's my neighbor?"

"Who do I have to love?"

"Sweetie, do I *have* to buy you flowers for Valentine's Day?"

"Love Muffin, how many minutes of romantic dialogue do you require before you're willing to make whoopee?"

"Jesus, how many minutes a day do I need to pray to You in order to get my life to work?"

"How much am I required to give, and is that before or after taxes?"

"Who do I have to love in order to get that eternal life?"

Some questions are already the wrong answer.

So Jesus says, do this: "Love your neighbor as yourself and you will be living". That is: Love is Life.

The lawyer is asking, "Do I have to love?" That is, "Do I have to live in order to live?", which means he doesn't even perceive life or love. Some questions are already the wrong answer.

So, the lawyer asks, "Who's my neighbor?", and Jesus tells a story. He asks a very specific legal question, and Jesus tells a story. Don't you hate that?

If you want a legal answer, try the Koran: there are tons of laws. And Mohammad will map it out for you in detail. Try the Koran, try Mishnah... that's what this Jewish lawyer wanted – "commentary on the Law." Try the Koran, try Mishnah, try any number of so-called Christian theologians and authors. They'll map it out for you: who's in, who's out. Who you have to love like yourself, and who you don't.

Try the Koran, try Mishnah, try the Christian bookstore, but stay away from Jesus. 'Cause He tells stories. He is a Story ... the Greatest Story.

The lawyer asks, “Who exactly is my neighbor?”, and Jesus tells a story... an inverse parabolic ballad in seven stanzas. Jesus is the ultimate story teller.

Verse 30 (1st Stanza):

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.”

Last spring, I got to see the descent from Jerusalem to Jericho. It’s hugely symbolic. Jerusalem is the site of Eden, the Celestial City. Jericho is the elevation of the Dead Sea, the Abyss. This man (*adam* in Hebrew) is going from Jerusalem to Jericho. Robbers strip him and leave him half-dead... that is, unconscious.

In that day, people were identified by two things: what they wore, and how they spoke. This man has neither. This is *basic humanity*, with no attributes to merit love. He was most likely a Jew, but we don’t know for sure. He was basic humanity ... actually only *potential humanity*... he could be dead. A traveler passing by wouldn’t be able to tell.

(2nd Stanza):

“Now by chance, a priest (who would be riding) was going down that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.”

The listeners would consider the priest justified in passing. A priest was defiled if he touched a Gentile, or came within 4 cubits (5 feet) of a corpse. To be ritually cleansed was humiliating, very costly, and took at least a week. The priest wants to justify himself, like the lawyer, so he rides past.

(3rd Stanza):

“So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.”

The Levite was like an assistant to the priest. More than likely, because of the nature of the road, he would’ve known that the priest had already passed the man lying on the side of the road. So undoubtedly, the Levite thought, “Who am I to help this man if the religious establishment – the priest – didn’t help?” The Levite would probably be walking. He couldn’t carry the man to safety, like the priest. However, he could give First Aid. And yet, to stop and anoint those wounds might be highly unsafe, for he doesn’t know who the man is or where the robbers may be hiding.

(Middle / 4th Stanza):

“But a Samaritan...”

That word would have jolted the listeners. Samaritans claimed that they were the faithful children of Abraham, descended from the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, who worshiped truly on Mt. Gerazim.

The Jews (descendants of the tribe of Judah) claimed that the Samaritans were Assyrian half-breeds, and heretics. The Mishnah declared that, “the one who eats the bread of Samaritans is like one who eats the flesh of swine.” Daily in the synagogue, the Samaritans were publicly cursed, and the worshippers prayed that Samaritans might not be partakers of eternal life, but remain in Hades.

The lawyer would naturally justify himself – judge himself first and best by judging the Samaritan last and least. We all do that: call ourselves winners, by calling others losers. We define ourselves as *in*, by judging others *out*. We justify ourselves as *saved* by judging others as *lost*. Sociologists call that “scape- goating”: we find someone to blame, someone unforgivable, someone to despise.

Groups in this world define themselves by their scapegoats. So, to question a scapegoat is to question a group’s identity, and you very likely might become the *new* scapegoat. It’s worth asking, “Do we have scapegoats?” And do we need more than one? Well, back to the story.

“But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion.”

The word there is *Splagchnidzomai*... it literally means “bowl movement”. But not like you’re thinking. The bowels were believed to be the seat of love, so when they moved, they moved with compassion. It means that the Samaritan saw this unidentified man on the side of the road, and he loved him from the very depths of his being. Convulsions of love. *Splagchnidzomai*... the passion of God.

(5th Stanza)

“He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.”

Jesus uses language that makes it clear to his listeners that the Samaritan is doing what God does... he “binds up wounds.” And the Samaritan does what the Levites did in the temple: “pouring on oil and wine.” Oil and wine were sacrificial libations, yet now they are also acts of Mercy. And Scripture said, “This is the sacrifice that God desires – Mercy.”

The Samaritan does what the Levite should’ve done in the temple, and here... almost like the temple and the body of this man are the same thing. Oil would soften the wounds; wine would clean them. It was First Aid.

(6th Stanza)

Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him.

See, the Samaritan did what the priest could have done.

And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, “Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.”

The Samaritan is coming back. That's an inverse parabolic ballad in 7 stanzas.

Then Jesus says,

"Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."

Look at this:

- The lawyer asks: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"
- Jesus asks *Him* about the Law – he knows the law and recites it.
- The Lawyer, deciding to justify himself, then asks "Who's my neighbor?"
- Jesus tells a story in 7 stanzas.
- The last three mirror the first three = ABC – CBA

Jesus lumps the robbers, Priest, and Levite all together as if they were really the same. In fact, they're all dead religious thieves.

But the Samaritan is the Hero, and the Samaritan atones for the sins of the other three:

He gives first aid, pouring oil and wine.

He carries the *Adam* to safety.

He gives money, he leaves him cared for, and he promises to return.

You might ask *where* is he going? Why is he going? How does he leave?

One thing the listeners would know is that this Samaritan has insane courage. For a Samaritan to ride into a Jewish town like Jericho with what was probably a half-dead unconscious Jew was like suicide. They'd be looking for a scapegoat in Jericho. It's like if an Indian rode into Cheyenne, Wyoming a hundred years ago with a dead cowboy on his horse. That's just not where you want to be.

The love of the Samaritan could literally get him crucified. And maybe it did ... but he's coming back.

So Jesus tells the story, then looks at the lawyer and says, "Who proved to be the neighbor to the man (the *Adam*) who fell? Who proved to be the neighbor?"

And we all want to say, "But, um, Jesus ... the question was 'who is my neighbor?' 'Who do I have to love?' 'Who is my neighbor?'"

But Jesus ignores that, almost as if it's a nonsensical question. He redirects it by asking, "Who proved to *be* the neighbor?" ... As if that's the only question that matters in this world.

The lawyer answers, "The one that showed mercy (*Hesed* in Hebrew)." Then Jesus says, "Go and do likewise." In other words, don't ask "Who is my neighbor? Who do I *have* to love."

Have mercy on any WHO, love any WHO, and so turn any WHO into a neighbor by proving to be *their* neighbor.

Don't wait for neighbors, be a neighbor creator.

Don't wait to love the loveable. Love for the unlovable is mercy.

Don't wait to love the loveable. That's not real love. Love the unloveable, and make them loveable with love. Prove to be neighbor, have mercy, bleed love!

So Jesus says, "Do that! Go and do that! Go and do likewise."

That is, "Go and make yourself last and least and despised, like a Samaritan. Then find a man – any man – with no attributes to merit love on his own... and then *have compassion*, love from your gut, from the very depths of your being, as your deepest desire.

And what is love? Scripture tells us that love isn't simply an emotion, or something that you do. Love is God, for God is love. To love is to have the life of God flow from your gut like a spring of Living Water. So Jesus says do that: empty yourself, become "last and least," find the unloveable, who don't merit love, and give them the very lifeblood of God at the cost of your own life. Die for those that hate you, because you want to.

"Go and do likewise," and *then* you'll live. Then you'll be living. Then you'll be alive.

Now, if you're any kind of lawyer, or if you've got just half a brain, you've got to be thinking, "I'm dead. If that's life, I'm dead... I thought I was alive, but it was an illusion ... I'm dead."

The lawyer's got to be thinking "I'm dead, and not only that, the robbers are dead, the priests are dead, the Levites are dead, the whole religious system is dead ... all dead. So I don't need Mishnah, I don't need more laws or loopholes. I don't need a counselor or a workbook or a class. I don't need more 'knowledge of good and evil' ... I need a Savior!"

Bingo.

I'm not living, I'm stripped naked lying on the side of the road, half-dead. The priest can't help me, the Levite can't help me, I need the Samaritan... the Good Samaritan to anoint me with his oil and wine, His Spirit and His Blood. I need *that* Good Samaritan.

Jesus said, "God alone is good." So does the good Samaritan even exist?

Karl Barth writes:

The good Samaritan ... is not far from the lawyer. He stands before him incarnate, although hidden under the form of one whom the lawyer believed he should hate, as the Jews hated the Samaritans.

The early Church leaders (Clement, Irenaeus, Origin) all agreed that the man going down is Adam, Jerusalem is Eden, Jericho is the world, the robbers are Satan and his demons, the priest

is the Law, the Levite is the prophets, the inn in Jericho is the Church, and the Samaritan is Jesus.

In John 8, the Jews say to Jesus, “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and you have a demon?” Jesus says, “Well, I don’t have a demon.”

Jesus is the Good Samaritan: we have made Him our enemy. With every sin we curse the Man of Love and nail him to a tree.

He has made himself “last and least”, for *we* were last and least. He has chosen to be cursed in our place, to be our scapegoat. That was His choice.

And now, this is the ultimate question – this is the judgment: Look at Him and answer, “Who proved to be Your neighbor?” That’s the judgment. One day all eyes will look on Him whom they have pierced, and they’ll see it. He bore every wound, every sorrow, every need. He proved to be the neighbor. That’s the judgment. Will you confess? Will you receive the love of the Last and Least, the Despised and Rejected, the One you hated most? Will you be loved and be love?

He said this: “Whatever you do to the last and least of these, my brothers, you do to me.” So reject the Samaritan and you reject Jesus, you reject life, you cut yourself off from the Great Neighbor. In other words, you judge yourself out of God’s neighborhood.

But receive His mercy, confess Him as your neighbor, let Him anoint you with his oil and His wine... and You will change. You will “go and do likewise”. Why? Because His wine is His lifeblood, and His oil is His Spirit. You are His Body, and He gives His life to you.

For on the night He was betrayed by us, He took bread and broke it saying, “Take, eat, this is my body.” And in the same way, after supper, he took the cup and he said, “Drink of it, all of you. This is my blood of the Covenant, which is poured out for many, for the forgiveness of sins.”

We love because He first loved us. He tells us “Go and do likewise.” And *now*, when we “go and do likewise,” we begin to experience His life. We are His Body. So when we “go and do likewise,” His blood flows from one member of His body to another member, and we begin to live in the Divine Neighborhood, on the edge of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Now, it can be very painful here, but it turns to ecstasy there.

Mother Theresa used to tell about one time when her sisters found an old man dying on the street. When they picked him up, the whole of his back literally remained on the street. They brought him home, cleaned him, and washed him, and the man never said a word. On his back, they could see nothing but bones.

Mother Theresa asked the sisters, “What did you feel while you were touching him?” One answered for the rest. She said, “I’ve never felt the presence of Christ so real as when I was touching him.” It was the presence of the Samaritan. And the old man on the street was an

angel. Not Angel Torres, not a spirit, but a messenger from the Divine Neighborhood – an invitation to Love... an invitation to Life.

When we do loving things, we experience loving feelings. But it's not *just feelings*. It's God. For God is love, and love is life and Jesus is the life... it's the presence of the Samaritan. Jesus said, "Keep my commandments. Love Me, and I will manifest to you. I'll send a Helper, my Spirit."

So, Sanctuary Downtown, we're downtown for a reason. Don't wait for neighbors. In Jesus' name, be neighbor creators.

Walter Wangerin did not like Arthur Forte. Arthur came to Walter's small downtown church in Indiana every Sunday, and every week he sat in a different place. He would disturb the service: he'd talk to the people next to him, he'd even criticize Walter while he was preaching.

He was a small man, an old man, a toad-like man, who did not bathe. He would sit there in the sanctuary with a cigarette just kind of hanging off his lip.

One Sunday, Arthur didn't show up. Nobody missed him at Grace Lutheran, especially not Walter. His absence made the service just that much smoother. But later in the week, Walter got a call. On the other end of the line, it was Arthur. He said, "You pastors still make house calls?" And Walter said, "Uh, I guess so." Arthur replied, "Well, start calling on me!"

So Walter started calling on Arthur. When he first went to his place in July, he was utterly shocked at what he found. Arthur lived in this shotgun house, and he literally existed in this old, greasy, stuffed chair down front in the middle of the room. It was dark, it smelled, and it was musty. Around Arthur's chair were old, damp newspapers and cockroaches. In the corner of his room, there was this little black and white TV that would hiss and pop. And Arthur would smoke cigarettes and flick them at the TV, and they'd bounce off. There was no danger of fire, because everything was so wet and moldy.

Walter would bring communion when he visited each week. But Arthur didn't want it. He only wanted to poke holes in that young clergyman's faith in a good God. Walter did not like visiting Arthur. But he did, because Jesus said, "Go and do likewise."

In August, in the heat, Arthur got worse. He wouldn't leave the chair, not even to go to the bathroom. He'd just sit there, naked in the dark, in the heat, in the stench, in the chair. In late August, as Walter was visiting Arthur one day, as he sat there naked in that oily stuffed chair, Arthur said, "I want communion." Walter said that it just about killed him, giving the body and blood of his Lord to *that* 84-year-old belly, in the chair. But he did it.

At the end of August, Walter walked in on Arthur, and he found that Arthur had fallen out of his chair. He was lying naked and prone on the floor in front of his chair, and he couldn't get up. So Walter went to him, bent down to him, put some clothes on him, and he took him to the hospital.

When he got to the hospital –the bright, new, shiny hospital – Arthur said, “I’m thirsty!” So Walter asked for some water, and the nurse said, “I’m sorry, but you can’t have water until you’ve been admitted, and he needs and shower and a bath ...” And Walter began arguing with the nurse. He began arguing the legalities of the hospital on behalf of Arthur. And finally, after half an hour, and after a bath, he finally got his water.

When Walter left that night, he heard Arthur say, “Where am I?” And then he groaned, “Why ... am I?” When Walter got home that night, as he was sitting in his study alone, he got a phone call. Arthur was dead. And Walter began to cry, and then he began to sob... deep sobs... he began to weep for Arthur. Like he missed Arthur. He said, “I sobbed and I wept like I would sob for my own father, my own flesh, my own blood.” Huge, deep sobs from the depths of his being. *Splagohnidzomai*, the passion of God. And then Walter said, “It was then that I realized that I, Walter, *loved* Arthur Forte! I loved him!”

You see, Walter had proved to be the neighbor. Because the Great Neighbor had proved Himself in Walter. And if only for a few minutes, Walter lived on the edge of the Divine Neighborhood.

See, I think I’m pretty dead. Most of us are pretty dead. But the Samaritan didn’t wait for us to become *His* neighbor, did He? He came to us and made Himself our neighbor. So come to the table, and let Him anoint you with His oil, and anoint you with His wine. Love convicts us, Love saves us, and this is Love.

In Jesus’ name, believe. And go and do likewise.

We came asking “Who do I have to love?”

And then the Samaritan came and washed you with His oil and wine, takes you to safety and promises to return.

Now, don’t you *want* somebody to love?
Don’t you *need* somebody to love?
Wouldn’t you *love* somebody to love?
You’d better find somebody to love,
in Jesus’ name.