

“Morningside Mercies”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Candidating Service
Edina Morningside Community Church; July 13, 2016

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

[A]nd the Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, when you obey the Lord your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” 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.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he 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?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Last month I attended the Minnesota Conference Annual Meeting, the yearly get-together of UCC people at the College of Saint Benedict near St. Cloud. I had received the thrilling invitation to be your final candidate by that point, though the news was not public. Still, I just *had* to share it with someone. So I mentioned it to a colleague who serves our UCC church in Grand Marais. “Edina Morningside!” she said. “I’ve always loved that name! It invokes the morning, with all the beautiful serenity I know along the North Shore.” I couldn’t have said it better myself. “Morningside” suggests to me possibilities, freshness, and an eternal new start. Certainly I also feel that way because I’m thrilled at the idea of serving as your next pastor!

During the search-and-call process that led to this candidating occasion, I had the opportunity to learn much more about you through the church profile, the search committee and your references. What struck me immediately was the breadth and depth of your commitment to the greatest commandment,

especially loving the neighbor as yourself. I got a phrase from an old hymn stuck in my head: “*morning by morning new mercies I see....*” Your mission, service and outreach to the neighbor make these Morningside mercies clear. You love the neighbor whose child attends the preschool, the neighbor inspired by your creative music and theater, the neighbors served for so long by Loaves and Fishes (and then Families Moving Forward), the neighbor whose community group finds this a welcoming place to meet, the neighbor teenager driving past the building who sees a rainbow sign of God’s affirmation for her identity, the neighbor half a world away at your partner Daylight School in Kenya. In the language of tonight’s parable, you try in many ways to be the Good Samaritan, offering mercy to those facing hardship on the side of the road.

Like the Good Samaritan, you also go beyond simply bandaging up wounds and wishing the neighbor well. I’ve been heartened to learn about your interest in supportive housing for homeless youth and young adults in Edina. Groundbreaking for the new project—“66 West Apartments”—was just last night, and its 39 units will be ready next year. Cooperating with other congregations, you have been learning how faith communities can support efforts like this to end homelessness in Hennepin County. Like the Good Samaritan you help provide shelter, healing and recovery that goes beyond immediate acts of direct service. Long-term, sustained networks of care make it possible for our neighbors to move from the side of the road to healthy living again.

Preacher David Lose points out three things the Samaritan does in Jesus’ parable, which we might imitate if we are to “go and do likewise” with our neighbors. Those three things are seeing, drawing near, and taking action.¹ All three passersby—priest, Levite and Samaritan—see the half-dead man by the side of the road. The priest and Levite see the situation, but I suspect they don’t see the wounded man as an actual person. They see instead interruption and delay, so they pass by on the other side of the road. The Samaritan truly sees this stranger as a neighbor, as another child of God in need of help, and he cannot just walk on by.

Instead, the second thing the Samaritan does is draw near. He makes himself vulnerable—perhaps this is a trap, or he will have to bear the pain of being intimately connected to the suffering of another. He comes alongside the wounded one not as an expert or a professional or one with all the answers, but as another traveler who has something to offer and the willingness by God’s grace to do so.

That’s the third thing, taking action. David Lose writes that “Seeing is vital, drawing near imperative, yet the final and meaningful gesture is that the Samaritan actually *does* something about it. Compassion, in this sense, is sympathy put into action.”² The Samaritan put the wounded man up in a place where he could get care—connecting him to supportive services, if you will—and promised to maintain relationship by checking on and providing for future needs. He showed compassion not just for the time of immediate crisis, but also took action for the longer term.

Those three steps are what it looks like to love the neighbor as oneself. If it helps you (like me) to have a visual motion for those three steps, participate with me in this way. Draw a tear down your cheek to represent suffering, or mourning in the sense of grief. Then bring two hands together, side by side. Finally, send out your palms in an action of offering and service. Seeing pain—drawing near—and taking action. Mourning—in the sense of grief or pain. Mourning—side—mercies. (I was up at Pilgrim Point

¹ David Lose, “Dear Working Preacher” column for Sunday, July 10, 2016. Available online at <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/07/pentecost-8-c-the-god-we-didnt-expect/>.

² Ibid.

Camp for the past several days, so I got practice in connecting words and actions!) This is what it looks like to love the neighbor—every neighbor—as ourselves.

Of course, we know the world is a more complicated place than just “see the right thing, do the right thing.” It can be hard to figure out what the right thing *is*. That’s what leads Jesus to tell a story about neighborliness in the first place. Another pastor asks a good question about this parable, extending the story further. “What if the Good Samaritan found another man along that road the next day? And the next? Would he begin to look at why that area was beset with violence? Would he try to stir the powers that be to do something about the crime and poverty in the area? Or would he just keep fixing the wounds, keep giving money to the inn keepers and allowing the thieves to prosper?”³ Sometimes mercy means learning why the Jerusalem-to-Jericho road is so dangerous in the first place, and responding to *that* concern.

This, it seems to me, is where the Gospel challenges us today. Open the paper and you’ll see the unmistakable concerns of our cities today. This time they involve taillights, traffic stops, and the tragic killings of black and brown people. Today’s highways include peacekeepers in mortal danger, nonviolent direct action by Black Lives Matter, and the all-American tradition of protest “for a redress of grievances”. Last week we saw the conflict spill over into deadly violence again, with echoes that continue to gum up the highways of Minneapolis and Saint Paul.

The issues of race in America are so monumental that a decade of sermons could not address them all. So you’ll be glad to know that I won’t even try. But the parable of Jesus tells me that we risk being the wrong person in the story if we simply pass to the other side of the road and move on. So what does it look like to regard people of color neighbors with the same lens that Jesus demonstrated with the Samaritan? What do “mourning—side—mercies” look like in this context?

First, we are called to truly see one another, and see the situations that have led us to be where we are on the road in the first place. What are the robbers of deadly violence that threaten peacekeepers and people of color alike? What are the histories that inform how these communities interact with one another? Only by looking for deeper truths, truly seeing one another as children of God in need, can we consider the second move, drawing near. How will God lead us nearer in compassion and neighborliness to those who are different from us, in terms of skin color, economic status, political party or any of the other differences among God’s diverse people? Drawing near requires the risk of becoming vulnerable to the other, yet trusting God nevertheless to bring us alongside so we can truly see and be seen. And finally, loving the neighbor as ourselves leads us into action. Merciful actions respond both to immediate crises with immediate assistance, and also consider how a longer-term engagement might meet unseen needs in the neighbor and in ourselves. You know this—you practice it already. The call of God among us in such a time as this is to continue offering such “Morningside Mercies” to all the neighbors we ever encounter, in the name of Jesus Christ.

God’s commandment to love, as Moses tells the Hebrew people in Deuteronomy, “is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away”, not in heaven or under the sea. “The word is very near to you; it is in your

³ Robb McCoy and Eric Fistler, Pulpit Fiction podcast, show notes for July 10, 2016. Available online at <http://www.pulpitfiction.us/show-notes/175-proper-10-c-july-10-2016>. Citing Brian E. Konkol’s article “When Robbers and Innkeepers Profit from Good Samaritans” on the *Faith Forward* blog at [patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithforward/2013/07/when-robbers-and-innkeepers-profit-from-good-samaritans/). Available at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithforward/2013/07/when-robbers-and-innkeepers-profit-from-good-samaritans/>.

mouth and in your heart for you to observe.” As we consider our response to this Scripture in our hearts, lets give the last word to Mister Rogers, who had a thing or two to say about neighbors. “We live in a world,” he says, “in which we need to share responsibility. It's easy to say ‘It's not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem.’ Then there are those who see the need and respond. I consider those people my heroes.”⁴

Let us pray: “Ever-faithful God, whose being is perfect righteousness: reconcile us in your Son with the helpless and the needy, with those we would ignore or oppress, and with those we have called enemies, that we may serve all people as your hands of love, and sit at the feet of those who need our compassionate care. Amen.”⁵

⁴ https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/32106.Fred_Rogers.

⁵ http://www.ucc.org/weekly_seeds_caring_neighbors. Prayer is from The Revised Common Lectionary ©1992 Consultation on Common Texts.