Changing the Question Peace Presbyterian Church

Luke 10:25-37 Summer Parable Series #1

Elizabeth M. Deibert 14 July 2019

It is wonderful to be starting our Summer Parable Series today. Each week for the next seven, a different group of people of all ages will present a parable in worship. We hope that the preparation will build stronger bonds across generations, enliven worship, and help us all to get inside the stories of Jesus to open these gifts and discover their truths and mysteries. Most of all we hope these parables will not be reduced to a single meaning, for they are vast and beautiful and irreducible. Parables bring to the surface unasked questions. They challenge us to look at unexamined parts of our lives. (Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus)*

It was a joy to have our day campers this week at church every day 8 to 5. When I spend time with young children, I have flashbacks to day of active parenting when I would get questions like, “I’m so bored. What can we do?” Whew! I just love that question, coming from a kid or teen who has been playing all day while I’ve been working to feed them, tidy up the house after them, get church work done around them.

That question always had an edgy answer in our house, such that the children would think about it seriously before saying it like that again. Bored, are you? What can you do? Oh, I have some very good ideas. You see the clean laundry in that basket. You can fold it and put it away. You see the weeds in the flower beds – those need to be pulled. You see the algae growing in the pool – there’s a long brush for that. You see the dishes on the counter. You see the fact that no one can walk through your room. I always hated it when my mom would start talking about washing windows and cleaning out cupboards. She always told me I was so good at organizing the Tupperware. I used to beam about her praise until I realized it was her covert motivation to do a good job and not to waste time.

Our lawyer asked an intriguing question of Jesus. How many chores must I do to inherit eternal life? No, that wasn’t the question. But it was sort of the essence of his question.

The lawyer knew the answer about our eternal life resting in the loving of God and neighbor, but he was still focused on the wrong issue when he went on to try to parse out just who the neighbor is. Of course, he wanted to get it right. Just who, Jesus, do I have to take care of? Which ones? Just who is legitimately my neighbor and who is not? Is it just the person who owns a house in my neighborhood or is the one who cares for the lawns in my neighborhood? How big is my neighborhood?

Is my neighbor the one who speaks the same language as me or whose ancestors immigrated to this country in the same century as me? Really Jesus, we need to know (and I am not joking or poking at anyone here) we need to know just how to work on this border issue and immigration. We are not sure what we can do, what will be helpful, what is a healthy solution. We all recognize that we have a problem but in our most honest moments – when we are not just trying to win the word war, we recognize that it is not simple. We are confused and we need some answers, Jesus, to our questions. Because we all care, no matter our political persuasion. Deep in our hearts, beyond our sound-bytes and social media comments, we know it is not a simple question with an easy answer. We cannot simply say, “let’s be nice and let everyone and their mother and brother in” nor can we simply tighten the borders and think that toughness will be the answer to the migration of humans caught in desperation.

While we are all busy asking the wrong question, “Which people are we supposed to care for?” Jesus says, “Let me tell you a story.” And he tells the poignant story of person wounded by the side of the road by robbers, and those who walk by, and there have been many excuses given to priest and the Levite – that they could not touch someone who was unclean, but the fact is they are going toward Jericho and away from Jerusalem, so ritual cleanliness is likely not the issue.

It is hard for us to realize just how difficult this shocking this story was for 1st century Jews to hear. Their enemy is the hero of the story. The Samaritan was in no way “good.” Samaritans were the ones who had done harm to Jews. We might as well name the story “The Good Terrorist” to get Jesus’ point across in the 21st century. It is the least expected one who has compassion, who shows up the other ones, those of us, who should have cared. It is that one that lets the pain of the wounded soul touch and transform both attitude and action. It is that one who not only cares in the moment but provides on-going support, saying to the inn-keeper, do what you need to do for this guy and I’ll cover it later. It’s not just a warm heart – the Samaritan has financial resources to share too.

So what about us? Are we here asking the wrong question? When we want to justify ourselves by trimming down the neighbor list or at least clarifying the boundaries of the neighborhood, Jesus doesn’t give us a clear answer but a rather irritating one. He says, “Let me ask you? Have you considered that the one you fear might be a better neighbor to suffering people than you? Perhaps that one would stop and help out if you were the one hurting. Stop trying to calculate about who is worthy of your attention and get on with being a good neighbor.

It is all about what question we ask, as Martin Luther King Jr and Amy-Jill Levine remind us. But generation after generation gets stuck on the wrong question. Which ones are my neighbors? Should I help that one? No, that one is wasting my resources. For whom do I have to sacrifice? How many chores must I do before I can play?

Christians, we are called to pay attention to the question Jesus asks. We must go deeper than simple answers to complicated questions. We must be the ones who find ways to be merciful. Our question is this: Who is doing a good job of showing compassion and how can we join them?