

Draft

**Talk at All-School Chapel
The Lovett School
August 27, 2003
Luke 10: 25-37**

Thank you, Hampton, for those kind words. I am grateful to you and the Board of Trustees for giving me the opportunity to come to Lovett and be part of this very special community. I am also grateful for how warmly the Lovett family has welcomed me, Penny, and Sara to this place.

I would like to begin my talk with a prayer. Let us pray:

Lord, we give thanks this morning for your creation, your generosity, and your love. We also give you thanks for this wonderful community – The Lovett School. We could never do justice in words or in prayer to your unconditional love for us or to our sense of gratitude for what those who have gone before us have made possible for us. Please help to keep before us that old Celtic saying that reminds us of our debt to our forebears:

**“We all warm ourselves on fires we did not kindle;
We all drink from wells we did not dig.”**

Those of us blessed to be a part of Lovett today are the beneficiaries of almost 80 years of devotion and generosity and love bestowed upon us by literally thousands of students, teachers, parents, trustees, and friends. Lord, may we never forget what you and your servants have made possible for us, and may we always be grateful. Amen.

Pause.

You can imagine the situation. Like any good attorney, the lawyer in this morning’s New Testament reading wants to make sure that he understands fully what his opponent is saying, and so he asks Jesus very directly: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus responds in that time-tested, and sometimes frustrating way of teachers of all generations, “What do you think? What do you think is written in the law? What do you read there?”

This lawyer is well-trained and knowledgeable, and can quickly recite from memory the law governing eternal life – law which God gave long ago to the people of Israel: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and you shall love your neighbors as yourself.” And, Jesus quickly says, you have given the right answer and therefore you will live. You will enjoy eternal life.

The lawyer is not satisfied. He keeps pushing Jesus, probably because he wants to prove himself equal to Jesus in debate, and also because he is determined to demonstrate that Jesus’ teachings are flawed. And so in an oft-used debating technique, he asks Jesus to define his terms: “And who is my neighbor?” What people fall under the definition of neighbor? Define the word neighbor, Jesus. The implication is clear – certainly Jesus can be more specific about who my neighbors are and the particular people whom I really need to love. And he certainly can’t mean that everybody is my neighbor, or so the attorney thought.

Jesus proceeds to tell the attorney a simple but powerful story about who our neighbor is – a story involving a man “going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.” Keep in mind that this journey is a solid day’s walk, and that as you walk northeast from Jerusalem to Jericho, you are descending – “going down” – 3,200 feet over the course of 15 miles or so. Many centuries later, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., walked the path from Jerusalem to Jericho and described it as dangerous, lonely, and foreboding. The man in Jesus’ story is traveling by himself, is robbed, stripped, beaten, and left for dead.

A priest then happens along this route, sees the victim, and, thinking him dead and not wanting to have any physical contact with a dead man, quickly crosses to the other side of the road and passes him by without a second thought. To the priest, this poor soul lying on the side of the road is a problem to be avoided. Shortly thereafter, a Levite, who has important duties in the Temple, reacts similarly. He sees the victim and he cannot get away from there soon enough. “We are outta here,” the priest and the Levite think to themselves! And who could blame them? How many of us would react in the same way?

And then something unusual – almost unbelievable – happens. The Samaritan, a person of an ethnicity and background that drew the hatred of virtually everyone at the time, comes upon the helpless victim, sees him, has compassion, and helps him. Because there was such hostility between the Samaritans and the Jews, everyone would have understood – in fact, they would have expected – that the Samaritan would not have given a moment’s notice to the man who had been robbed and assaulted. No one could dare criticize the Samaritan for ignoring the almost dead man on the side of the road, especially after the priest and temple official would have nothing to do with him! Anyone in the Samaritan’s shoes would have walked right past the poor soul lying on the side of the road. After all, the Samaritan knew that the victim and almost everyone else for that matter, hated him because of his different background. Given the hate directed at him by so many members of the community, why should he help this fellow? (Pause.) But the unexpected does occur, and the Samaritan not only bandages the victim, but he also puts him on his animal, takes him to a local inn, cares for him, leaves money for his further care and lodging, and tells the innkeeper that he will be back! This from a man who had every reason to just keep on walking.

What can our lawyer friend say now? Absolutely nothing. When Jesus asks the lawyer who is the neighbor to the helpless victim – is it the priest, the Temple official, or the Samaritan – what can the lawyer say? Nothing but the truth: the powerful, inexorable, undeniable truth. The Samaritan is the neighbor because he reaches beyond ethnicity, conflict, difference, religious convention, and hatred to help someone in need.

What does it mean to be a neighbor? I am not sure there has ever been a more important time to grapple with this question! Indeed, in a world challenged daily by ethnic, social, and religious conflict, what we decide about our neighbors has powerful consequences for us as individuals, for our school, for our communities, for our nation, for our world.

Fortunately, this parable gives us some clear guidance about who our neighbor is, even if that guidance challenges us to the core! Or, as New Testament theologian N.T. Wright has written:

“What is at stake, then and now, is the question of whether we will use the God-given revelation of love and grace as a way of boosting our sense of isolated security and purity or whether we will see it as a call and challenge to extend that love and grace to the whole world.”

Wright goes on to suggest that no church, no nation, no community, no school, no person “can remain content with easy definitions which allow us to watch most of the world lying half-dead in the road.... (All of us) must find fresh ways of telling the story of God’s love which will do for our day what this brilliant parable did for Jesus’ first hearers.”

This vision of love proclaimed in Jesus’ definition of neighborliness requires real, daily actions of love along with a willingness to reach out to those whom we may not necessarily find attractive or interesting. It is relatively easy to be a neighbor to those we naturally warm up to, and it is important to care for those close to us and for whom we feel affinity. But this story has in mind a more expansive, more inclusive vision of the neighbor. Simply put, our neighbor is everyone and anyone, and to carry out this demanding definition of the neighbor, we must be willing to risk and undergo hurt, rejection, and pain. The good news is that because of the self-giving and self-expanding nature of love, we truly receive love as we give love. And, we are both challenged and comforted by the knowledge that God is with us as we assume the risks inherent in the Samaritan’s inspiring example of love.

What then are the benefits of being a good neighbor? Harold Kushner, the great Jewish theologian and scholar, speaks powerfully about the very real advantages of neighborliness. Reaching out to others, Kushner reminds us: **“Matters to them”, “Matters to you”, “Matters to the world”, and “Matters to our Creator”**. In other words, there is real grace in being the kind of neighbor we see in this story from the Gospel of Luke.

Frederick Buechner, a pastor and theologian who coincidentally attended and served schools very similar in philosophy to Lovett, speaks powerfully about the inextricable connection between love and grace:

“Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is Grace.... (T)he Grace of God means something like this: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn’t have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrific things will happen. Don’t be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It is for you that I created the universe. I love you. There’s only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace – can be yours only if you’ll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift, too.”

For Frederick Buechner and Harold Kushner, and for the Samaritan, seeing the dispossessed, the marginalized, the lonely, the almost dead, the down and out, the unattractive as neighbor is a gift of love and grace; a gift that when grasped brings with it even more grace and more love.

- Billy Peebles