

Proper 10 C 2019

Luke 10:25-37

Who is my neighbor?

When someone asked that of Jesus,
There was nothing sincere about it.
Nor was it a new question.
Both the question,
And the answer,
Were popular theological questions
In the time of Jesus.

So we might imagine
That when the lawyer stood up to test Jesus,
His concern was not,
How shall I act justly,
And stay in right relationship with God,
But a way of finding out if the wandering teacher and healer,
Whose friends called him rabbi,
Really knew what he was talking about.

And Jesus starts by giving the right answer.
Love the Lord your God
With all your heart, and all your soul,
And all your strength,
And all your mind –
And your neighbor as yourself.

There was nothing original about his answer.
It was when he started to tell a story,
That everything opened up,
Turned upside down,
And became confusing and filled with possibility.

Who is my neighbor?

Long ago and far away,
I was part of an after school arts and reading program –
Similar to the one we had here at St. Andrew's
Twenty years ago.

It met, not in a church basement,
But in a storefront neighborhood center

Near an elementary school.

The vision was one on one reading help
For the first hour,
And small groups of children
Engaging with an art project
For another hour.

Developing relationships
Was of the essence,
Demonstrating care to young children
Whose homes and family circumstances
Were often sad and scary,
Showing these girls and boys,
by weekly faithfulness to the commitment,
that they mattered,
that there was someone who saw them,
heard them,
cared if they were bumped and bruised,
would notice and grieve if they disappeared.

Before a new school year began,
We would gather with the volunteers,
The tutors and art teachers,
For two afternoons of training.

That's when I first reconnected with Sandra,
The mother of a childhood friend.
A tiny lady with a soft, clipped voice,
Perfect hair,
Beautifully tailored suits,
A lovely home.

I remembered that her husband
Appeared to be just the same –
Impeccably dressed,
Formal in his manner,
Demanding appropriate behavior
Not only in his house,
But in his presence.

They were kind people,
but not, as far as I could ever see,
warm, or approachable,
or engaged with anyone outside their small and comfortable circle.

Yet here she was,
Mrs. Drake –
Though now of course
I was to call her Sandra.

Pairing of tutors and children
Was supposedly random,
Though sometimes a little art was employed
In order to increase the chances
That a child and adult
Would have fun and do some good work.

Randomness prevailed
When Sandra encountered little Chip.
Cute, smart,
Foul-mouthed,
Brash,
Smelly,
And very, very dirty.

After a few weeks,
Sandra asked – she was a rule follower –
If she could buy Chip
A few new t shirts.
And some underwear.

The rules said no.
Sandra, we learned later,
Starting breaking the rules.

When she drove Chip home –
Yes, this was long enough ago
And far enough away
That tutors drove the children home.
There was no Safeguarding training,
And frankly the only questions raised
Were about the safety of the tutors,
Driving into the children's neighborhoods.

When Sandra drove Chip home,
She would stop on the way and buy him
A package of t shirts,
Or socks,
Or underwear.
Oh, and a hot dog
Or an ice cream.

Then she would take him to his door.
And drop him off.
She would watch until the door opened.
But she did not go to the door.

Against all odds,
Sandra and Chip
Were a good match.
Each of them looked forward to their weekly sessions.

Chip liked it so much
That one day he brought his big brother with him.
Buddy.
Bigger, more foul-mouthed,
More brash.
Just as dirty.

The rules said,
One tutor,
One child.
The rules said,
Second and third graders.
Sandra asked if Buddy could stay.

One day, Sandra was sick.
Chip and Buddy
Arrived,
And we found a sub for Sandra,
And then her husband,
Mr. Drake – Dan –
Came to drive them home.

He did not stop on the way.
But when they got home,
He walked them to the door.
No one opened the door.
Buddy knew where to find a key.
The three of them went in.

Dan saw a scene of utter squalor.
And it was cold.
Dark.
Buddy admitted that no adults –
Of the several who lived there –
Had been around much for a few days.

Boys, said Dan,
How about if you come home with me tonight.

How could I leave children
Alone in that place,
He said to Sandra when they arrived.

Baths, macaroni and cheese,
Homework, a video,
Clean sheets on the twin beds in a guest room.

Hot breakfast,
Clothes washed and dried
To put back on for school.

There were still no adults
When Chip and Buddy showed up at home
The next afternoon.

So back they went,
To Dan and Sandra's.

This is not a fairy tale.
Chip and Buddy did have a father,
And grandparents.
And they really did need a home
Where their basic needs
For food, clothing, shelter,
And some sense of order
Were recognized,
Even if imperfectly met.
Their father,
The parade of other adults in the house,
The grandparents in another state,
Could not offer them what they needed.

This is not a fairy tale.
It's a messy story.
It's a very human story,
With a lot of heartbreak and broken promises
And wasted energy.

I will spare you most of the ins and outs,
The ups and downs.
But I will tell you a few things.

Dan and Sandra moved to another state,
And they took Chip and Buddy with them.
Buddy had a hard time,
And chose to go live with his grandparents.
Chip had a hard time,
And stayed with Dan and Sandra,
Who had become his guardians.

Sandra would call me up once in a while,
And she would send me their Christmas letter.
An invitation to Chip's graduation
From a middle school
For "strugglers."
An invitation to his graduation
From a prestigious high school.
And then, one day,
A heavy cream colored envelope.
Inside, an engraved announcement.

We are so proud and happy
To welcome into our family
Our adopted son, Chip.

Who is my neighbor?

When I consider Jesus's story,
When I enter the story
Of the Samaritan
Who reaches across every boundary,
Of fear, prejudice,
Distaste and distrust,
To touch and tend a fellow human being,
When I consider Jesus' story,
Sometimes I think about Dan and Sandra,
And Buddy and Chip.

They came from very different worlds.
It is amazing that they ever encountered each other at all.
It is awe inspiring that Dan paid attention,
And offered an invitation that turned all their lives upside down.

It began as an act of charity.
It was the threshold of transformation.

This is a true story.
And it is no fairy tale.

Everyone was changed
That afternoon
When the three of them
Walked out of the house
And got back in the car together.

Chip and Buddy were real young boys,
Not dolls to be dressed
In nicer clothes.

They were real people
With connections and experiences
That had to be honored.
They were transformed by new opportunities,
And challenged
By the collision of their very separate worlds.

And the couple who offered them a home
Were equally challenged and transformed,
By their years of listening,
Learning,
Discovering the good there had been
In a world that had always seemed
Dark and strange –
The world of the underserved,
Undernourished.

Who is my neighbor?
The one I once thought was utterly different.
Threatening.
Helpless and hopeless.

This is the work of Jesus.
Reaching across boundaries.
Breaking chains.
Casting the net wider and wider
Until at last we see
That we are all neighbors.
Whom should I love as myself?
No one is left out.
Everyone belongs.
This is the good news that will renew the world.