Who Gets to Be Our Neighbor?
Scripture: Luke 10:25–37 and Genesis 1:1–4a

I was born and raised in Western Pennsylvania and for a period of time, lived in Pittsburgh. For those of you who don't know, Pittsburgh is home to one of America's most famous neighbors, Mr. Fred Rogers. On television, Mr. Rogers made it seem easy to love our neighbors, but in reality- that can be easier said than done. Have you ever noticed how easy it is to love your "neighbor"; that is until you have to decide who your neighbor really is?

We love the idea of loving our neighbors and being neighborly- it can be the reason some people live in a particular area for a really long time. I've seen yard signs with folks loving their neighbor; I've seen it on T-shirts, Mr. Rogers sang about it, "Won't you be my neighbor."

BUT- what happens when our neighbor looks different from us? What if our neighbor speaks another language or practices a different religion? What happens when the person in need is someone we have been taught to fear, distrust, or avoid?

With that it mind, our passage today becomes a challenge, for both you and for myself because it challenges us to consider how easily we can celebrate loving our neighbors while maintaining boundaries that exclude the very people who need our compassion.

In our passage today, Luke 10:25-37, Jesus confronts these questions in a very familiar parable: the Good Samaritan. As I was preparing this message, I got to wondering: I wonder whether our familiarity with this story has made us too comfortable with its message.

In our passage today, we are presented with a narrative of a lawyer that approaches Jesus. This lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus immediately directs him to the law: love God and love your neighbor as yourself. But as we continue to read, the lawyer, wanting to justify himself, asks, "And who is my neighbor?"[1]

That question becomes Jesus's entry or doorway into the parable, and I would argue, our entry or doorway to some uncomfortable questions for the church today.

To understand the story, we need to understand its original setting. The Gospel of Luke is my favorite gospel because, at times, is a travel narrative of Jesus providing teachings on his way to Jerusalem. In our context for today's passage, we know that Jesus was a first-century Jewish teacher speaking to a predominantly Jewish audience living under Roman imperial rule.

It is important to note that the original audience's world was shaped by religious obligations, economic inequalities, political oppression, and distinctions involving ethnicity, ancestry, and religious practice. Sadly, not too different from our world today in many ways. We continue to see the oppression of our neighbors- people of color, people of different faiths, people of different socioeconomic statuses.

1

For the world of our text, it is important to note both the Jewish people as well as the Samaritans shared historical and religious connections. We also know that the relationship between these two communities was marked by significant disagreements and longstanding tensions. They were closely related communities, not simply two completely unrelated peoples that stumbled upon each other.[2]

Luke's Gospel does not identify the author by name. Some scholars believe the author was a well-educated Gentile who was writing for a community navigating questions of belonging, salvation, and the boundaries of God's welcome. Although we cannot, and probably will not ever fully know the author's precise social location with certainty, the writer's attention to outsiders and people on the margins invites us to consider how questions of identity, belonging, and exclusion shaped the community that received this story.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus's ministry is presented within this complicated world, where he often challenged assumptions about who is included in God's purposes.

Pivoting to the parable, we hear Jesus tell of a traveler attacked by robbers and left half dead. A priest sees him and passes by. A Levite sees him and also passes by. Then a Samaritan comes along, sees the wounded man, and responds with compassion. He treats his wounds, takes him to an inn, and pays for his care.

The shocking part is not simply that someone helps a stranger- which is profound. Jesus takes it to the next level. The major shock of the passage is that the person who becomes the example of faithful love is a Samaritan—the person the original audience might have been least inclined to trust or admire or even help themselves.

Our text today teaches us three lessons. The first lesson is that Jesus challenges us to question the boundaries we create around compassion.

Notice that the wounded man is never identified by ethnicity, occupation, or social standing. The only identifier we receive is that he was a "man" as stated in verse 30. We do not know whether he is rich or poor, respectable or disreputable. We really don't know much about him: he is simply a Jewish person who was attacked and is in need of help.

It is also important to note that the Samaritan does not first ask whether the wounded man is a member of his community; in fact, he never speaks to him at all. Not a single word is expressed between the two. He does not demand proof that the man deserves assistance. He sees suffering, and he responds.

A hermeneutic of suspicion, or the art of interpretation, invites us to ask why we sometimes read this story as a simple lesson about individual kindness while ignoring the social divisions that make the Samaritan's actions so significant. We tend to like that simple Sunday School explanation and want to leave it there; however, this passage also challenges us to examine how interpretations of Scripture have sometimes reinforced the very divisions Jesus confronts.

2

We know that Christian history includes interpretations that have been used to justify a lot of terrible and horrible things. Some things on that list include: racial hierarchy, slavery, segregation, and the exclusion of people deemed inferior or unworthy. We must be honest about that history. We must be honest about the fact that the Bible has been used both to resist oppression and to legitimize it.

We should also be careful not to turn this parable into a story in which all Jews are portrayed as uncaring and the Samaritan as a convenient symbol of moral superiority. Jesus and the people in his story are Jewish, and the relationship between Jews and Samaritans is historically complex. The point is not to condemn one people in favor of another. The point is to unsettle our assumptions about where goodness can be found.

That brings us to Genesis 1:1–4a. Before there are nations, borders, racial categories, or even systems of social ranking, Genesis proclaims God as creator. God brings light into being and sees that the light is good.

The opening of Genesis reminds us that goodness originates with God. That goodness does not originate and is not found with the categories that we as human beings have constructed. I believe that when we connect this creation story to the Good Samaritan, we are invited to recognize that no human being's dignity depends on whether we consider them one of our own.

The second lesson we learn from today's passage is that Jesus shifts the question from identifying our neighbor to becoming one.

As we heard earlier, the lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus ends by asking which of the three acted as a neighbor to the wounded man. The lawyer answers, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus responds, "Go and do likewise."[3]

Did you hear it? Did you hear that shift? The lawyer wants to establish the limits of his responsibility, the bare minimum that we have to do. Jesus calls him to practice mercy. Instead of limiting, Jesus invites us to expand our understanding.

We do something similar to the lawyer, don't we? When we ask questions such as the following: Does a particular person belong here? Does this family deserve help? Is someone who identifies as an immigrant our responsibility? or Is racial injustice really our concern? When we aske these questions, we are engaging in the responsibility limiting practices of the lawyer. Sometimes our questions are less about understanding our obligations and more about finding reasons to limit them.

The parable that Jesus presents about the Good Samaritan is one that does not ask us to abandon discernment or ignore genuine questions of safety and accountability. However, it does ask us to examine when our boundaries become excuses for indifference. It asks us to think about those times when we put up boundaries to exclude and ignore our neighbors rather than engage in extravagant welcome and hospitality.

3

We know in our present context that racism is not limited to individual acts of hatred, although that is a part of it. As Walter Bruggeman writes in *Tenacious Solidarity,* "[white extremism] aims at protecting whites Christian privilege and excluding nonwhites by circumscribing rights, privileges, and entitlements of US Citizenship."[4] It isn't only action- it can and does operate through our institutional practices, the ways in which people have unequal access to resources. It can and does operate through our assumptions about who is dangerous, as well as through our decisions about whose suffering deserves our attention.

Friends, we cannot dismantle racism simply by declaring that we love everyone- that alone is not enough and never will be. We are called, in fact, we are required to also examine and address the practices and structures that allow some people to flourish while others are excluded, neglected, or dehumanized.

Our last lesson from our passage today is that the person we have learned to see as an outsider may become our teacher.

Jesus could have made the respected religious leader the hero. Instead, he places the Samaritan at the center of the story's moral example.

That reversal challenges our assumptions about who possesses wisdom, who embodies faithfulness, and who has something to teach us about God.

For us in the church, this means listening to people whose experiences have been marginalized, including our siblings in Christ who are people of color who can name realities that others may never have had to confront. It means being willing to hear uncomfortable truths about our congregations, our institutions, and our interpretations of Scripture. It means moving beyond welcoming people into spaces where the existing culture remains unchanged, toward sharing power and changing the structures that exclude them.

We know that the Book of Genesis declares God's creative work is good. We can see through our passage today that Jesus shows us what neighborly love looks like when that goodness is threatened by violence and division. When we pull Genesis and Luke together, these texts challenge us to ask whether our lives and communities reflect God's intention for creation.
So I return to the question with which we began: Who gets to be our neighbor?

Perhaps the more faithful question is this: Whom have we been taught not to see as our neighbor? Whose suffering have we learned to overlook? Whose voice have we dismissed? And what might God be asking us to change?

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is not a story about being nice to someone in need. It is more than that- it is a challenge. It is a challenge for us today, here, and now. It is inviting us to challenge the boundaries that we put up to keep compassion at a safe distance and bring those boundaries down. It is a call to question inherited prejudices, confront the systems that dehumanize people, and practice a love that crosses the roads we would rather avoid.

4

The God who called creation good has not given us permission to decide that some people are less worthy of dignity than others.

May we have the courage to see our neighbors more clearly, the humility to learn from those we have treated as outsiders, and the faith to do more than speak about love.

May we embody it—in our churches, in our communities, and in the structures we have the power to change.

And when Jesus says, “Go and do likewise,” may we be ready to answer.
Amen.