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10C  
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St. Luke's Saturday Neighbors

“And who is my neighbor?”

I have vivid memories of my neighborhood growing up in the 1950's in a small costal town in Virginia at the mouth of the York River where the Mattaponi and Pamunkey Rivers meet. From my home on second street I can walk out my front door and put my feet in the Mattaponi River three houses down. I especially remember the weekends. Each Saturday afternoon around 1 o'clock I would walk by myself or with my younger brother up town to about 7<sup>th</sup> street to the West Point Theatre. The Saturday matinee costs 14 cents. During pecan season we would receive a little *lagniappe*, as the Cajuns say, “a little something extra”. The owner lives on 3<sup>rd</sup> street and has a huge pecan tree in his side yard and gives out with each ticket a small paper bag of the southern treat for us to crack and eat during the show. Every Saturday we see a double feature, one about space aliens or a comedy with Abbot and Costello. The second feature is always a cowboy movie, Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Hopalong Cassidy, Cisco Kidd, The Lone Ranger, Lash Larue. Of course we have our favorites heroes. Mine is Dale Evans, but it never matters what is playing. The movies are always entertaining, but what keeps us coming back is the weekly serial, often starring Flash Gordon, Batman, or Superman. Each week something terrible happens. Our hero can not get to a crime scene in time or his love Lois Lane is about to be pushed off a cliff. We are compelled to come back the next Saturday to see what happens. There is a short intermission between the main features to get popcorn and a drink and to cool off the projector. We cheer when the heroes save all in distress and boo for the villains. **Everything** is black and white, the movie, the characters... **and the people**. You see, colored people as they are called then, sit up high in the balcony very separated from the whites. I don't think they are allowed to go to the concessions. We never see them except when they slip up the narrow stairs at each side of the lobby to ascend to their seats. What bothers me today is that I do not question this segregation of people and unequal privileges or consider it wrong in any way.

We just get up from our seats when the movie is over and walk home to the same Saturday night dinner, baked ham and my grandmother's cook Mabel's homemade rolls. Mabel lives with the other Negroes in unpainted wooden homes with no electricity in shanty town on an unpaved dirt road in the marsh down from my grandparent's home. On Sunday I go to the Methodist church in the morning and go to the Baptist Church in the evening with my grandparents. I help my grandmother and Mabel get ready when the Ladies Missionary Society meets at her home to have tea and talk about raising money for foreign missions. We are devote Christians, good churchgoers, giving money for the poor in foreign lands just as the Levite and the priest were good Jews, following the Law of Moses, but we **all** fail in our blindness to see another in need in our own backyards because they are different. We fail to

see how we allow injustice and inequality thrive for people different from ourselves, people of color. I think that we are even worse than the Levite and the priest because we are blind even to the needs of those we **know** and **love** who care for us in our own homes, in our own small town. We will never be able to make amends, but I find myself unconsciously and consciously trying to make daily amends, daily attempting to look around to see the invisible people not given equal rights, respect and opportunities, and trying to pay a little more attention to the question Jesus answers 2000 years ago that we hear today, “And **who** is my neighbor?”

“Teacher,” the young lawyer asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Inherit, **inherit** eternal life.” Our lawyer friend thinks that this unknown life after we die is something we **inherit**, as if it is like a gift we might receive from our parents when they die. Yes, we do receive something from our parents and our grandparents, a foundation, a strong foundation of what a difference a relationship with God can make in our life./ Jesus doesn’t tell the lawyer, “you are so wrong already in your question. This is a stupid way to ask your question, but Jesus stays with what the lawyer knows and can relate to and asks him, “What does the **Law** say?” You can see the pride in the lawyer as he hears a question about something he is so familiar with and he immediately recites the law, “Love all, love God, and love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus then gives the lawyer an A+ on this exam and tells him to go and love like that./ We don’t know if the lawyer just wants Jesus to test his knowledge of the law more intensely or if he is like us and wants some very practical answers as to how to live this life of love. Perhaps there is a period of silence as the lawyer wrestles with Jesus’ answer, but finally he cannot contain himself. He asks the “**who**” question. “Who is my neighbor?” So Jesus tells the haunting story that is all so familiar to each of us about the Good Samaritan on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho who rescues the injured man that is ignored by the Levite and priest. At the end of the story, Jesus asks the lawyer, who in the story is the neighbor to the robbed, half dead man in the ditch? Our lawyer friend answers, “The one who shows mercy.” It is as if it is still too hard even to say the name Samaritan, a group also Jewish but so detested by the Jews because of their suspected intermarriage during the exile. Jesus then commands the lawyer and each of us to “go and do likewise.”

Mercy to those in need, but more than that. Caring for the wounds of my enemy. When did I last show mercy? I am not sure, but it is a word to keep on our lips. It is a word to speak at the end of the day as we review our day just before our eyes close. “Did I show mercy today?” Did I see someone sick, or hungry? Did I care for someone I am no longer in relationship with, maybe even an enemy? Did I especially see someone very different from myself, **very different**, dressed differently, speaking differently, and did I show mercy to him or her? Hopefully our ministry with Family Promise feeding homeless families will help us make this connection.

My mind wanders and travels back to my hometown. Things have changed, not because of anything I have done, but because of so many other courageous people who knew better than I who is in need, who my neighbor was. The shanties are gone. The movie theater has closed down, but blacks and

whites go to movies together as well as going to school and sometimes even church together. I have made a feeble attempt here to connect to a black church in North Little Rock, Bethel AME, and was even invited to be a part of their Martin Luther King service in January. We talked about doing some prison ministry together, but we are still just talking. But alas, I never invited their pastor here. Being a good neighbor is much harder than I ever realized. Events of the past week tell us that blacks and whites still have so far to go before they can see that they are neighbors.

I talk to people from my hometown. They do now have some black friends, but the circle of strangers, the outsider now includes others, Hispanics, Muslims, refugees, those who are homeless, people who are homosexuals or transgendered./ Must we always have some group of people who are not our neighbors? As I talk with friends who are smarter than I am, they believe this **hate, yes hate** neighbor is born of **fear**. Yes, fear may be a huge reason we must have neighbors we hate. Fear, that they will make us different, fear that they will harm us. Indeed some will harm us, the few that have been taught to hate **us** as neighbors as well.

We listen again to the news each night. The stories about neighbors who hate each other are ever present. It makes our soul weep. You and I may not be able to change the world, but we can change how we live with our neighbors around us, here in North Little Rock. Each night let us say as we go to sleep, “Who is my neighbor? Who is in need? Where today did I show mercy, especially to someone different from myself? Who was the despised stranger, the Other, the Christ who came to change, to save, to **heal** us today?”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>William Willimon, “The God We Didn’t Expect,” Pulpit Resource, vol. 44, no. 3 year C July, 2016, pp. 5-7.