

**Loving our Neighbors, Jon Singletary**  
[Psalm 82](#) [Deuteronomy 30:9-14](#) [Luke 10:25-37](#)

Like most of Jesus' parables, the gospel reading for today has seen innumerable interpretations, readings, and misreadings. Some are entertaining, some make you scratch your head. Origen brought the most well-known allegorical reading where the Priest represented the failings of the law, the Levite of the prophets, and Jesus is the Samaritan. The wounds are human disobedience and the inn where he is taken is the church, and the Samaritan's return is an announcement of Jesus' own second coming. For some it is purely a story of evangelism; for others of social justice. Then, it is read, perhaps most straightforwardly, as a call to mercy and compassion. And don't we need that today; there are opportunities all around us to be more compassionate, as individuals each and every day, and socially in our communities, at our border, and around the world.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is what we most often call this parable. This title that we have added to the text is a layer of interpretation not included in the text itself. That reference shows some implicit bias, that most Samaritans are not good, which would likely have been the crowd's response, given that Samaritans were despised by the Jews as being impure, half Jewish and half Gentile. When the Northern Kingdoms of Israel were taken captive by the Assyrians, they intermarried with them to settle in the place that is called Samaria, just north of Judea. As usually happens in such cases, they adopted the worship of their false, pagan gods and so the whole people were more detestable than their Roman conquerors.

In the parable, Jesus asks us to love our neighbor, even the ones we have hated and if the despised outcast can show mercy, so can we. And in the story, the writer of Luke challenges us socially as well as personally.

African American Baptist scholar, Dr. Lewis Brogdon, has written a recent reflection on Luke highlighting the references to poor and rich that are found throughout the third of the synoptic Gospels, meaning that while this gospel has much in common with Matthew and Mark, one of its differences is the narrative theme of poor and rich: the rich young ruler, a certain rich man, a rich landowner, Mary's Magnificat, Zaccheus, and others highlight this theme. A socio-political reading brings another lens to this Gospel theme. Dr. Brogdon writes about the attention given to the socio-political context of the first century, and the relationship between imperialist Rome and suffering caused by their occupation of Israel.

The oppressive nature of Roman rule is the deeper reason for why Luke gives attention to certain groups of people. Brogdon writes, Luke "offers a critique of a system exploiting and crushing people. Even when the poor and rich are not mentioned directly, Luke addresses other groups who are socially marginalized – the infirm and women. There are abundant examples of Jesus' care for the downcast throughout Luke: his cleansing of a leper; a paralytic; a man with a withered hand; his raising of widow's son; his forgiving of a woman caught in sin; his healing of the demoniac; his raising of Jairus' daughter; his feeding of five thousand; his story of the good Samaritan that illustrated the importance of helping anyone in need."

Brogdon offers “a rereading of Luke’s gospel in light of the privileges systemic injustice affords some and denies to others.... Luke’s Jesus announced and proclaimed the gospel in response to an unjust world that produces suffering.”

He concludes: “So too must our interpretations and theologies speak to these same issues. In other words, to faithfully interpret Luke today means to reflect upon the privileges white Americans gained from centuries of systemic oppression – slavery and segregation – and to ask hard questions of what Luke’s gospel, Luke’s Jesus, asks of us today.”

(Source: Christian Ethics Today)

One such approach to Luke, that reflects upon the role of race, is found in the 1972 collection of essays, the *Tragedy of the Moon*, by Isaac Asimov. Asimov, a biochemist and science fiction writer, published an essay entitled “Lost in Non-Translation” where he provides commentary on the parable of the Good Samaritan read in our gospel lesson for today. He says that most discussions of the parable fail to take into account the utter disdain the Jews had for the Samaritans and how difficult it would have been to hear that the Samaritan could be a compassionate, merciful neighbor. Asimov invites us to hear the story as if set in 1950 Alabama and asks us to imagine a white Southern gentleman left on the side of the road for dead, and after the mayor and a preacher walk by, a black sharecropper stops to help, to carry to safety, to pay for care, and to leave extra support for additional needs as they arise, spending most of what he has.

It is difficult for us today to own the extent to which we perpetuate and participate in the racism that still exists in our society, but there is no denying this 1950s context and what would have happened in a Jim Crow era police lineup that included a white mayor, a white pastor, and a black share-cropper if the story were turned, and instead of asking who is the neighbor, the crowd were to be asked who would be guilty of whatever crime it was that left the gentleman this way. And if we are quick to judge the imagined guilt of a man, then how can we possibly turn around and imagine him as our beloved neighbor.

As was often the case in Jesus teachings, he doesn't just ask what is wrong with how things are, but how much different ought things be in the Kingdom of God? Lakeshore, Calvary, most of us progressives in Baptist life today like to see ourselves as the good neighbor. Or at least as not being biased against our neighbor. We work hard to be on the right side of history. You have demonstrated that time and time again, and paid the price for your actions for justice. Several of us at Calvary admire and even envy your stance for justice, your prophetic witness, globally and locally. But what more does this passage ask of us? Many of us can see how we are still part of systems that require more work; how do we respond?

One framework we use in the GSSW is Kimberle Williams Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality. Intersectionality helps us see how race and gender work together to reinforce experiences of discrimination and oppression. She tells of the 1976 court case, *Degraffenreid v. General Motors*, highlighting discriminatory hiring in the auto industry: white women could access office jobs and black men technical and industrial jobs, but this industry, like most, was most discriminating against black women.

A colleague has recently published a critique of intersectionality (and followed with an argument about how sad it is that white men are being discriminated against now). For me, intersectionality isn't about creating guilt for white men; it is about giving me helpful language for more fully loving my neighbor. The value of intersectionality is in giving me a lens for self-reflection. It helps me make sense of my own identity; It helps me see how I have benefitted in our society as a cisgender, straight white male.

Throughout my time in social work education, I have been on a journey of looking at my heritage, my family experiences, my own decisions and opportunities, and the unearned advantages I personally have had. It is too often the case that I am seen as having knowledge, expertise, or power to make decisions, even when it comes to matters outside my role, field, or position. Privilege, power, and position often work together in my experience. Learning what these experiences mean is what Peggy McIntosh of Wellesley College described 30 years ago as unpacking the invisible backpack of white privilege that many of us carry around. She described how she "was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group."

The invisible systems mean that we who are white often have access to many elements of white privilege that we might not readily recognize. Perhaps you have heard the list:

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.
3. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
4. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
5. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
6. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely and positively represented.
7. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.

This list is 30 years old; how true is it still today?

As a father of teenagers, I see how these experiences are multigenerational among the men in my family. The African-American principal at my son's high school recently acknowledged that when seeing our son walk out of the school early (i.e. skipping class!), he assumed he had little reason to worry; he associated his whiteness with responsibility. It became clear to that principal and me that privilege allows my son to walk off campus with no consequences when his classmates of color always undergo closer scrutiny.

Experiencing this leads me to also look back at ways my white father and grandfather received social and economic benefits for education, housing, automobiles, and other purchases that have added to our collective wealth and that they know were denied people of color in their surrounding communities, since their community in East Texas was itself white-only.

I know I am a part of a culture, of systems, of institutions where I benefit from whiteness and can almost always choose to ignore race in my life, and as a result, my way of being in the world continues moving me forward while my colleagues have to manage race, and gender, as part of their experience at church, at work, in more settings than we care to acknowledge.

This is part of what Beverly Daniel Tatum describes as the moving walkway of racism. Moving walkways that move us forward, like those at some airports, provide an analogy for how racism works in America. Racism continues to move forward in society, and most of us know it is wrong, so we make choices that are non-racist. That's like not walking on a moving walkway; you are still moving forward on the system. The only decision that works is to stop, turn around, and actively walk in the other direction. She calls this being anti-racist.

Being nonracist in a white culture changes very little. I am learning that I have to find ways to be antiracist, and I have to wrestle with the ways I still support racism. I have to move past the guilt and the fragility of my experiences. I have to remember that a part of privilege means I can choose not to think about these things, in ways that my black and brown friends and colleagues cannot. However, my not thinking about race does not end racism, does not stop white supremacy; it is a symptom of it.

As Layla Saad, author of *White Supremacy and me*, says, "You cannot change your white skin color to stop receiving these privileges, just like I cannot change my black skin color to stop receiving racism. But what you can do is wake up to what is really going on, challenge your complicity in this system and work to dismantle it within yourself and the world."

This is what it means to be a good neighbor. It is not enough to say we love our neighbor, or that we are not racist, or that we have black friends. We have to wake up and actively engage our society in anti-racist efforts that challenge white privilege and white supremacy.

How do we wake up to this reality? How do I wake up to this challenge? These are the questions that are both challenging and inspiring me these days.

Waking up is truly the metaphor that makes the most sense to me in these conversations. And the trendy, colloquial notion of being "woke" should be a verb as well as a noun. Just as we can never say we are culturally competent because there is always more to know; we are never truly 'woke'. We are at best being awakened. It is a deep slumber we are in, I am in, and it is a significant task to "be woke," to continually wake up to the daily ways that being a white male is at work in my life, and to the ways I have failed my neighbors as a result of these things. For me, this work has created a sense of responsibility for addressing white supremacy in the society of which I am a part, and a commitment to work for justice and to love my neighbor in new ways. I may not have created racism, but I know I benefit from it still. And, as theologian Dorothee Solle writes, I am responsible for the house I did not build, but occupy.

And, in taking this responsibility, may we find out what it means to truly love our neighbors as ourselves.

Amen.