

# Define Neighbor

A Homily Expositing Luke 10:25-37

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Define, “test.”

A person steeped in the law stood up at the beginning of our gospel lesson this morning for the purpose, we’re told, of *testing* Jesus. Generative understanding of this reading, though, relies on ensuring that we have come to agreement on what the terms within mean. You have doubtless heard it said that to “test” Jesus here was a way of entrapping him in his own ways of thinking – to embarrass, or expose as a fraud, a person whose thinking challenged the status quo at nearly every turn. It is true that our gospels tell of deep conflict between Jesus and the religious establishment of his time and place and we do have stories in which it seems clear they are trying to confound him in public for all to see, so that *might* be what “test” means in this situation, but it might *not* be. It isn’t entirely clear and if we’re going to come to an understanding it would do us well to define the word.

It is conceivable that “test” simply means to engage in rigorous, gainful conversation. It does seem that religious communities of Jesus’s time and place used something similar to what we call the Socratic method in learning. An idea is presented by an individual and the group begins to probe the idea with questions of curiosity and then ask questions about the responses, and questions about those all in hopes of together, pushing their minds to deeper understanding. To “test” Jesus may have simply meant to draw him, along with others gathered, into deeper thinking about the concept of “neighbor.”

That’s a topic of particular importance, you know, because it has just been revealed that in common thought, one’s access to life without limits is a product of one’s ability and willingness to love God and love their “neighbor,” whatever that word means. So with life in the balance, it is also possible that this questioner is looking for neither gainful, general conversation *or* to entrap Jesus. Perhaps he is looking to Jesus and his group of fellows for the sake of bracketing his (and their) ultimate level of responsibility. “Yes,” he may be saying, “loving God and loving neighbor are important we know, but what *precisely* does ‘neighbor’ mean?” The root of the Greek word used to convey this story has a literal sense of proximity. “Neighbor,” means at its core, those who are nearby, but in common usage it seems to imply something more than proximity – affinity? Maybe. Does neighbor mean something about a shared relationship because of, but not necessarily reliant on proximity? Maybe. Does neighbor infer something about shared loyalties to the same government? Maybe. Does being a neighbor require sharing perspectives and ideas that come from living nearby one another? *Maybe?* If any of those things are implied in the term, then this love that unlocks life may not necessarily have to be extended beyond the boundaries of the local community or at least the broader region. It wouldn’t include those whose loyalties lie elsewhere, whose taxes don’t uphold this community, whose ideas are obviously degenerate. “Jesus, define neighbor, because we may not have to work as hard at love as it seemed at first.” Maybe the questioner and those gathered were looking to lighten their load *or* maybe they were looking to justify unloving behavior already behind them – perhaps looking for a loophole to support and live by policies that harm others as long as they’re not our “neighbor.”

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Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

That brings up one more possibility. The word, “neighbor” found in writings that would have been foundational to and contemporary with Jesus and those in his wider world seemed in places to be a kind of euphemism for Israel and the Jewish people. That makes some kind of sense, doesn’t it. A nationality is a kind of reality that is centered around proximity, but includes more than just a place. We could see how in that sense “neighbor” could be applied broadly to fellow residents of Israel, but also to others who may be *from* and *of* Israel, but residing elsewhere. We could also see how “neighbor” in that sense might bracket others who are physically nearby, but by virtue of their nationality, loyalties, ideas, or what have you are obviously *not* neighbors. If in fact, there was a live conversation in the ethos about who was rightfully, truly, *legally* American – I mean Jewish, Israeli – if there was a conversation about who were neighbors in that sense, the man asking Jesus to define “neighbor,” may have been seeking to justify and uphold a kind of nationalism. Sure, others in the world have every right to exist and to pursue a good life, but by virtue of God’s blessing on *this* nation, rightful and full citizens of *this* nation are the most important, indeed the only, needed recipients of our great love. How do we attain eternal life? By equating God with country and putting America first – Israel I mean. I keep doing that, don’t know why. Maybe Jesus’s questioner was just trying to hold up nationalism for consideration.

Do you see? Defining things is important! A single word taken in different ways changes everything! Whether he was upholding a certain ideology, justifying misbehavior, or simply being curious, the man who stood to “test” Jesus was asking Jesus to, “Define, ‘neighbor.’”

Stop me if you’ve heard this before, but Jesus responded with a story. Do you ever get the sense that Jesus is the chatty uncle at the family reunion who just lives to tell his stories? As if he begins, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho…” and everyone in the room groans and says, “Oh, not this one again!” For better or for worse, Jesus’s now iconic story about the man on the road who was attacked by robbers and left for dead and his ultimate salvation at hands of an unlikely helper is a response to the question, “Define, neighbor.” There are so many little nuances in that story that are so very worth our time and attention, but I’ve preached those sermons before, so today I want to look more broadly – less at the details of the story than the function of the story in Jesus’s telling. Namely, I want you to notice that Jesus didn’t answer the question asked of him.

The man asked, “Who is my neighbor?” but if we read closely, the story does nothing to define a set of parameters by which he, or we, might be able to determine who his neighbor, or our neighbor, is. Instead, the story serves to *reframe* the question. A priest and a Levite, both people of renown and respect within the community to whom Jesus speaks, pass by. While there are reasons understandable to those hearing the story for their having done so – religious obligation, the man appeared to be lost anyway, etc. – the reality of their passing by is shocking nonetheless, but not nearly as shocking as the heretical outsider who *did* stop to help. Shock wasn’t the reason for telling the story though, but just a way to break down preconceived notions. However the word, “neighbor” is defined, it has nothing to do with piety, nothing to do with religious affinity, nothing to do with one’s position in the community or *outside* of the community at all. The neighbor in the story is the one who *did* something when something needed doing, the one who by their living introduced compassion, healing, and restored life to a person in a vulnerable position. The story doesn’t answer, “Who is my neighbor,” it answers, “Whose neighbor am I?”

And so we end almost exactly where we began. A man stood to test Jesus asking him to use his ideas and his words and his theological and political savvy to define “neighbor.” And so with his words and his social and theological savvy Jesus spun a story that demonstrated that all the right theology and all the social location and all the cleverness in the world can’t make or break a neighbor. The only thing that matters is what we’re willing to do for one another and for the other when it is needed most. Jesus says, in other words, with your actions and with your life, define “neighbor.”

Amen.