



# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

The Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Chief of Parish Ministries

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## Neighbors

*Sermon preached at the 11 a.m. service, July 14, 2013*

*The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Based on Luke 10:25-37*

I'm curious—how many of you have heard of the Good Samaritan? It is one of the most familiar stories in the Bible. Even people who have never read the Bible know about the Good Samaritan. They know the gist of the story—someone who went far out of his way to help another person in need. Or they know the name of a Good Samaritan charitable organization. Or a Good Samaritan Hospital. Or they've heard of a Good Samaritan award. Good Samaritan means good neighbor.

Who is my neighbor? Lord have mercy, here in New York, don't we have eight million neighbors? Many of whom we come to know much more intimately than we would wish, as we ride hip-to-hip and nose-to-nose together on the jam-packed train or bus at rush hour, especially in the heat of the summer.

When I first moved to NY, I was advised, "Don't get too friendly with the people who live in your building—it will lead to trouble. When you see them, just nod politely and speak only about the weather." I was blind then, but now I see.

In the density of our city, it's possible to hate your neighbors without even knowing them. Like my new neighbor Sasquatch who lives above me—my apartment shakes with heavy thuds whenever he walks. Or your neighbor who wears stilettos on her wood floors, seemingly 24/7. Or the one who practices basketball shots against your bedroom wall. Or blasts something loosely called music at 3 a.m. Neighbors.

There are some notable exceptions, of course. I do know New Yorkers who actually lend each other wineglasses for parties, who care for each other's apartments when they're away, even care for each other. One of my friends kept her neighbor's guinea pig during an extended absence. This guinea pig had serious health problems that required medication with an eye-dropper every few hours. I would give her a Good Samaritan Award.

That road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a desolate, dangerous road. It still looks and feels that way to me now. Have you ever been driving on a desolate road, you're the only car on the road, and then you notice a car on the side of the road with the hood up, a tire off. Do you stop to help? I would, but I'm late for my flight or to the hospital. I don't know how to fix an engine or change a tire. What might this cost me? It could be a trap. I could be mugged, or worse.

We live the New York City version of this almost every day, don't we, traveling these sidewalks (our roads) as we do? Whether desolate late at night or crowded during the day, they present equal opportunity to see people who need help. Who hasn't seen this? A person collapsed on the steps, shoeless, smelling really bad, with open sores. A large man in clean business-casual clothes lying on the sidewalk, struggling to get up. Has he fallen? Is he ill? Drunk? Should I stop to help him? The beautiful young woman, expensively dressed, tottering on 5-inch designer heels, weaving down Lexington Avenue late at night, staggering. Has she just come from a bar? Is she drunk? Drugged? She will be easy prey ... Does she need or want my help?

We all know there are good and not-so-good reasons for passing by on the other side of the road. We have our excuses, our fears, our lack of time, our lack of knowledge, our lack of resources. In the face of so much need, we wonder: What can I possibly do? What should I do? It's easy to feel guilty for not doing something, or for not doing more.

Sometimes we do help. You may have heard this past week of the woman stabbed by another woman as she got off the #6 train right up here at 59th Street and Lex, in what appeared to be a random attack. Charles Williams, a street cleaner, was working above that subway stop. He heard the screams and saw people running out of the subway. He first thought it was a terrorist attack, but then he heard people screaming about a knife. He ran down into the subway and found the woman still brandishing the knife on the platform. "Williams and another unidentified good Samaritan successfully subdued her until police arrived. When he was interviewed afterward, Williams insisted, 'I'm not a hero. This is my town. This is my city. I love New York.'"

<http://www.wor710.com/articles/local-news-465659/man-who-tackled-subway-stabber-im-11465283/>

We want to be good neighbors. We see so much need around us every day. It can feel overwhelming. To be honest, I doubt I'll run into the subway to subdue a knife-wielding attacker. Though late one night at my local

CVS drugstore I did intervene when I encountered a young man verbally attacking his girlfriend on the sidewalk. It felt just as scary to me.

Parables, like this one Jesus is telling, aren't just nice little stories. Every parable has a particular twist to it—a twist that challenges us to expand our understanding. Note: Challenges, not forces. Jesus was an expert at parables, maybe the best ever.

In this parable that we call “the Good Samaritan” (we’ve named it so—that term is not in the text), that legal expert who’s asking Jesus these questions is an expert in Jewish religious law. He’s like a canon law expert in the Episcopal Church—someone who knows those canons (church laws) and the scriptures backward and forward. The people listening to this exchange between Jesus and the legal expert are good Jews, like we are good Episcopalians. We know the commandments, yes? And we try to follow them, yes?

Here’s the twist: to that legal expert and to that particular audience, there was no such thing as a good Samaritan. That would have been an oxymoron to them. At that time, Jews and Samaritans still hated each other, really hated each other, as they had for hundreds of years, for some very good reasons. Reasons so good that Jews and Samaritans literally went miles out of their way to avoid encountering each other. And they surely would never have touched each other.

As I reflected on this text this week, I went around asking people: If you were beaten up and left for dead in a ditch, who would you NOT want help from? I got answers ranging from the Taliban to Rick Perry.

Our City of New York, our city of eight million neighbors, is not a place where everyone looks alike, thinks alike, votes alike, worships alike. To live here is to be very aware of people who are different from us in almost every way imaginable. I think that gives us an advantage in understanding this parable.

Eight million neighbors. So many differences. So much need. Who is it we should help? Whom would we not accept help from? How can I possibly be a good neighbor to eight million people? Maybe in a simpler time, a smaller town, but here ... it really does seem absurd, impossible.

Each of us can be a neighbor to someone we know, or even to someone we don't know, who is in need. I hope I will do that. I hope you will do that. What I can do alone is limited. What we can do together through this community, this church, is a lot more. Together, as church, we can be even better neighbors to those who so desperately need a neighbor.

This week I met a man named John. John is the chef for St. Bart's Community Ministry programs. Three mornings a week at 5am, John cooks breakfast for 250 people, many but not all of them homeless, people who come to our doors because they are hungry. John actually does more than cook. He studied at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris and with private chefs here in New York. He is an artist with food. He **loves** cooking. When you hear and see John talk about cooking, his whole face lights up. You can tell he is truly called to cook.

John feels particularly called to provide the very best and most nutritious food possible to our neighbors in this city: neighbors who, at this time, have no way of getting or cooking their own food, neighbors who are hungry. John uses the freshest, best ingredients he can get. He has friends who are now growing organic herbs for him. When our guests eat a breakfast John has prepared for them, not only are their bodies nourished, but their souls and spirits are nourished as well.

On his own, John could feed some people very well, but probably not 250—three times a week. But working together, John and this community do feed 250 hungry people three times a week. Neighbors.

This question-and-answer exchange between the legal expert and Jesus may remind you of something in our own tradition. Whenever any one person is baptized in this community, we all stand and renew our own baptism vows, which take the form of questions and answers. One of the questions is this: Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? We all answer: We will, with God's help.

Like the legal expert, we know the commandments. We know the right answer. We make this promise. Whatever our excuses, our reasons for not being a neighbor, we are called to keep asking ourselves this question: Who is my neighbor?

We are called to remember this question: Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

And we are called to keep answering, to the best of our ability: We will, with God's help.

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