

## Service of Installation – Sermon

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*Note: This is a transcript of a sermon preached at Aldersgate UMC in Juneau, Alaska, on May 20, 2023. It was been edited to address automatic transcription errors and to clarify for an audience not 'in the room.'*

Before I read our scripture from Luke 10:30-37, which you have heard in a variety of languages thus far, I will read it in English. And since I've been crying, it'll probably be in my second tongue, which is Southern.

But you will understand much of it. But before I read it, I do want to offer a word of gratitude to each of you, each and every one of you gathered wherever you are. And I want you to know that moments like this, don't come around often. And when they do, I'm learning that when they do, we need to slow down a little bit. And we need to take them in.

Because I'm aware that when I was elected, and consecrated in November, alongside Bishop Carlo, and Bishop Dottie, I'm aware that my election and consecration, like theirs, was not just about me, or about us.

But it was about all those saints. All those who had fought, prayed, tried, and cried. All those who had been told that there's no way, it's not your time. Wait, you're not fit.

It's about all those people who went to their graves, or even sit in the sanctuary, or in the hollows of your homes, or other places, right now amazed at what God has done.

I think it's also about those children who are wandering around the world trying to figure out who they are, and where they might land. Will there be a place for them? Will there be a proclamation that says you are worthy, you are loved, just the way you are?

So, we have to pause to remember those who didn't get to see or to hear but believed. And we have to pause to make sure those who are yet unborn, know that there was a day, that there was a moment that a group of people paused and said, "We love you, right now, even before you arrive, and we're making space for you, before you even get here, so that you can walk your path and know God, and also know who you are. And be proud of that.

Grateful to my parents, who raised me in the admonition of the Lord to quote a little King James.

Grateful to all the pastors that served me faithfully through the years. Grateful for all the congregants who were bold and brave enough to allow me to be their pastor along the way.

And now all of you are a part of that flock.

And though I may not feel like seem like or even be called your pastor right now, I do know that every day that I am blessed to open my eyes, to inhale and exhale and put one foot in front of the other. Please know that I will be working, serving, and praying for the honor to be your pastor.

Amen. Amen.

Here are the words from Luke's Gospel. Chapter 10, verses 30-37

In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Now, before I get into the sermon, to those of you who are not seated here in this sanctuary, I do want to remind you that this service does include a service of holy communion. So, wherever you are, you are invited to bring forth elements that will allow you to participate with us at the appointed time.

So, some of you know that our theme for annual conference and for this next year for the Greater Northwest Area will focus on this notion of what it means to 'go and do likewise.' Yes, it's not just for the three days we're gathered together for annual conference; it's for the whole year. We're going to examine the ways in which we are going and doing all year so that when we come back together next year, we can give an account of all that we have done, give an account of all the places we have gone.

So, I invite you now to just think about a time right where you are; think about a time when you knew you were loved. Think about it. Feel it? How did it make you feel? And how did you know you were loved? In that moment?

I think we learned as we look at this text here and many others in our gospels, we learned that the love of God and for neighbor cannot be separated. We can also learn in the hollows in the sanctuary.

So, as we look at the Gospels, and as we examine how Jesus lead in ministry, we can surmise that love can be synonymous for neighbor. If you look at First Corinthians, chapter 13, which we just read at weddings now; I don't know why, but we do. But if you look at what we now call the love chapter, and replace the word love with neighbor, you'll discover something quite profound. Try it. I dare you.

But here in this text in Luke's Gospel, Jesus encounters a lawyer. And the lawyer asks a question, can you imagine a lawyer asking a question? But Jesus being Jesus, Jesus responds with a question.

Now, I would like to believe that I would have been in all of Jesus, and all of Jesus' wisdom and in Jesus' responses, but the truth is, I probably would have been just as pushy as the lawyer was in the text. Because your bishop has a little edge. I can be a little petty on occasion. Amen.

The first question that the lawyer asked Jesus is, what must I do to gain eternal life? And yes, Jesus responds with a question, what does the law say? Or how do you understand the law? The lawyer responds with words from Deuteronomy, Love the Lord your God with heart, soul, strength and mind.

Jesus says, "You've answered correctly, do this, and you will experience what eternal life looks like."

You would think that would end it.

But the lawyer then asked, "Well, who is my neighbor?"

And Jesus tells the story. It's not told as a recounting of an actual experience that Jesus witnessed; however, it's one that we have seen, and that we've seen lived out far too often.

For in this text, Jesus tells us a story of a man on a dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho, a road with a reputation for being a place where bad things can happen to good people. And on this road from Jerusalem to Jericho, robbers got the best of the man. And then you heard the story, a priest, Levite, and a Samaritan came upon the man along the side of the road. The priest and the Levite, the religious leaders crossed the road and made it to church on time.

But the Samaritan did not move to the other side of the road. He did not move to the other side of the road. Instead, he was moved by what had happened on that side of the road.

He was not moved by disgust.

He was moved by compassion.

He was not moved by being overwhelmed.

He was moved by responsibility.

He was not moved by the inflation of ego. You know, "I'm far too important to pause for this," but he was moved by a selfless and sacrificial act.

Jesus says that the Samaritan, the one who was deemed less than for the sake of this story, the one the priest, the Levite, and basically anyone else who considered themselves somebody would think less of just because they were a Samaritan. See, in your context, the one you think less of may not be called a Samaritan.

In the little town, I grew up in, there was a family or two that fit the description of folks you just stayed away from. Did y'all have those people in the towns you grew up in, any Samaritans?

We had one of those families in, for the sake of this sermon, and for our time here, we'll just call them the Langstons. For the sake of this story, and in your context, they may not be the Langstons. In your context, the Samaritans may be the Mormons, the Lutherans or the LA Lakers.

You know, all of this is highly contextual.

It may be dwellers in a tent encampment.

It may be the one who struggles with addiction.

The one whose political views seem too outlandish, the one who tells sexist or racist jokes, and you laugh at them just to keep the peace. It may be the one who was not born in the same country that you were born in.

It may be the family that plays loud music late at night or parks their dirty cars in front of your nice and respectable home. And when you are calm, and you go over, and you ring the bell, and you ask them to turn the music down, they look at you as though you don't have to be up early in the morning to do anything.

It may be those people who should know better than to try to cross a hot desert with their children in tow, and then have the nerve to be outraged when they get separated or turned away at the border.

It may be the indigenous or native peoples who still can't seem to rise above circumstances that happened to them so long ago.

The Samaritans still exist in many of our contexts.

There's someone that you think less of, and you only know what you've decided is important for you to know about them. Instead of taking time and effort to really get to know them.

I understand you may assume because of what you see, what you were told, or how you were raised, that you know, all you need to know. And heaven forbid if the Bible told you to believe those things. Yeah, had to go there.

But Jesus says that the woke one, I'm sorry, the Samaritan tended to the man's wounds, carried him to safety and paid for his care before going on to whatever he had to get to, and the Samaritan committed to return and settled any debt incurred while he was away.

Neighbor-like love is serious.

Jesus asked, who was the neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?

So, let's talk about this road from Jerusalem to Jericho.

See, we used to know those places, we used to be able to avoid the people who did not have our best interests at heart or places that we just knew we could go to, and we could be safe. But we only need to turn on the news or click open our phones in order to read about or hear about a mass shooting at a mall, a daycare, a church or a school. And now that there have been more than 200 mass shootings in 2023 alone. Where is that safe place?

And it's not just mass shootings that make for a dangerous road. Right now, six major cities in the US are on pace, on pace to pass historic, violent crime totals. And those are just the ones that get reported. They're usually not the ones in the communities that I've lived in.

This text makes me think about the dangerous roads all around us – pathways to adequate health care for those who do not have jobs, and cannot get them due to a myriad of policies and systems that were set up and set in place long before they were born. That's a dangerous road.

I think about the dangerous road for women who wish to make a private medical decision that now are subject to public spectacle.

I think about the dangerous road that divides the red states from the blue states, the immune compromised from the indifferent.

I think about the dangerous road for those whose ancestors fought and died for the right to vote, who now see what was assumed a basic right slowly slip away. I think about the dangerous road, that twists theological understandings to serve as basis for civil and criminal law in a democracy that was formed by many who fled religious persecution.

Dangerous Roads where neighbors mean the difference between life and death today, and tomorrow, joy and pain.

It seems that in 2023, as we figure out what life is to be in this season, we have to do the hard work of understanding and living Jesus' words, "go and do likewise."

If having eternal life is to love the Lord God with heart, soul, strength and mind, and to share that same love with our neighbors, Beloved, we have to get neighboring.

So, three components, I want to stress very quickly, three components or expressions of being neighbor.

The first one is to pray with your feet. Pray with your feet.

We're told in the text that the priest and the Levite were on their way to pray. There wasn't anything bad about where they were going, or what they were doing. They were doing what they were expected to do.

But how often do expectations or our attempt to fulfill expectations limit our expression of love of self of God of neighbor?

They were on their way to offer prayers. That's equivalent in my mind to, "Oh my, I'll pray for you." Or, "I'll add you, or I'll add that to my prayer list."

The great abolitionist Frederick Douglass was credited with saying, "Praying for freedom never did me any good till I started praying with my feet."

That's akin to the African proverb that says when you pray, move your feet.

After the historic March from Selma to Montgomery, where we see the future Congressman John Lewis, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, and the likes of many other civil rights leaders of many faiths and hues joined together. We have a quote from Rabbi Heschel that says, "I felt my feet were praying."

Prayer is private, and public. Prayer is quiet, and loud. Prayer is not and cannot be solitary, no matter how you do it. Prayer has to be about the whole of creation and all of the neighbors. Think about the key word in a prayer that we'll pray in just a little while that I believe all of us know. I mean, what's the first word in the Lord's prayer?

Jesus taught the disciples to pray, Jesus models that prayer.

It's active and inclusive. Let Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, not just to me and mine, or to us and ours. But to all, for all.

Give us this day our daily bread.

Forgive us our trespasses.

It's not about you. It involves you. It's not about you.

As we forgive those who trespass against us, our prayer is active and engaging.

The Samaritan prayed with his feet. He came upon a situation that required compassion, and action.

The priest and the Levite had religion, but no time. They had obligations, but no sacrifice. They had rules, but no understanding of what it meant to alleviate suffering in the here and now.

So Beloved, we have to pray with feet.

Second, heal with your words; heal with your words. Prayers may be words, but prayers cannot be words alone. Prayers must include action that is about the community, not just you and yours, but the whole community and creation.

Healing comes when we neighbor one another, when we love one another. Look at what the Samaritan and the innkeeper accomplished.

How we see one another determines how we speak about one another. I mean, if we have preconceived or even confirmed notions about a person, please know that what you know is presumed is from your point of view. And it may only be from one moment in time. And whatever labels you're willing to rest upon a person may say more about your character than it does about theirs.

The reason to be careful what you say about people is because what you say is usually based upon what you think, right? I saw this bumper sticker a couple of years ago, and it was so profound. I was sitting on a freeway in LA, so I had time to take out my phone, open it up and take a picture of it.

And the bumper sticker read, "Don't believe everything you think."

'Don't believe everything you think' can see those thoughts turn into words, and those words turn into actions. And sometimes, those actions perpetuate policies and practices that don't serve the neighbors well.

So, judgments and pronouncements that imprison and dehumanize others will never ever bring about healing.

Jesus juxtaposed the characters of the priest and Levite against a Samaritan because it was commonly understood that the Samaritans were a mass and wretched people. That had been spoken, communicated and passed down for generations, it was just understood.

But you also have to know that the question was raised about Jesus, "Can any good thing come from Nazareth?" None of us can escape it. No matter how good you may think you are, you may be somebody else's Samaritan.

But in this text, the Samaritan's character was revealed by what he did, not by what others said or believed about him. The Samaritan was clear about his motives and his intentions. We see it and what he did for the man alongside the road. We also hear it communicated to the innkeeper. Here is your money for what he needs right now. If you spend more than what I have given you when – when, not if – when I return I will pay you.

Those are healing words, to one who is suffering. That's a clear indication that the one who was wounded and neglected would not be left alone at any cost or by any means.

Think of at all those who died in hospitals, nursing homes and other facilities during the height of the COVID pandemic. Many went in alone and died alone. If that's devastating for the dying, imagine the impact being left upon the living.

To be alone, suffering, alone. Especially when you know, someone else knows about it.

The Samaritan didn't look, or feel badly about the situation and move on. That Samaritan prayed with his feet, healed with his word, by making it known. "I'll be back," to quote Arnold.

The third and final component of this is love with your resources.

You can go ahead and say "Ouch!" if you want to.

When "Amen" won't do, "Ouch" will suffice.

Communicating that I will not leave you to suffer alone is love in action. Making it known that "I will give for you" and "I will be with you" are expressions of love. Knowing that someone is making a sacrifice to support you is a clear indication of their commitment to you and to your well-being.

But love, like prayer, is not solitary. And it's certainly not passive. Love does not withhold, it does not keep score. Love is as relentless as it is resourceful.

So, we look at this text, and I ask you to consider praying with your feet healing with your words and loving with your resources. I invite you to get to neighboring, to get to loving.

Because neighboring is showing up for one another, it's standing in the gap with one another, it's giving on behalf of others. It's speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves, it's knowing how to ask those in need what they need, in order to be well. It's not making assumptions or just sending what you want them to have.

So, when I began, I asked you to think about a time when you knew you were loved, how that made you feel and how you knew it was love.

Now I ask you to think about how you will neighbor, how you will be neighbor. And I invite you to join me and our conference leaders on a journey. And this journey is about spreading love and being neighbor.

For a mile. It's a mile. It's only a mile.

But there's much to see. Much to become, and much to do on this mile.

It may be like that journey from Jerusalem to Jericho at times.



But you'll hear more about this mile during each of our annual conference sessions. But I want to invite you now to get ready for this mile journey.

So, 'M.' 'M' is about ministry that matters.

It's become very clear to me that ministry that matters in this broad area where we're called to serve land in two big categories, and that's around housing and health.

Housing is about affordability, access, and security.

We're going to spend some time on this mile, doing what we can to have an impact so that fewer and fewer of our siblings are without adequate and sustainable, affordable housing.

And that will require us to be different types of neighbors than we've been. It will require us to imagine Church that may not have a cross and flame on it. But that comes with a cross in its heart. Because it comes by way of brick and mortar. It comes by way of green space. It comes by way of offering back to indigenous and native people that which is theirs.

And then the category of health, we're talking about preparedness, prevention and equity in areas of mental health, physical health, public health, care for our climate.

It's just a mile, y'all. I told you it might be like that journey from Jerusalem to Jericho. But it's a journey we must take. It's a mile, we must traverse.

Somebody say 'I.' 'I' is about itineration and location. I have to give that a little flair, because it's not as exciting as housing and health.

But here's the thing. We talk about itineration and location, it could probably be called something else. But I needed to get my mile, and 'I' works for itineration, I'll just go ahead and own that. But as we work on this, it's about getting pastoral leaders where they can thrive, and ensuring that our congregations will receive and support the pastoral leaders that they need, not just the ones they want.

Because see, we have this thing in our tradition called open itinerancy. And I'll just say it here today, it's a thing of the past.

Oh, y'all didn't know that.

Open itinerancy worked when our clergy were all white, all male and all married. That's not the case now. Churches and communities need to be served. We need an equitable way of sending and serving that is fair and consistent. No matter where you are, no matter who you are.

We have to determine how we retool laity and clergy to serve in these emerging contexts of ministry. And they may not all be churches in the way that we have fashioned them in the past.

And this is also about working in partnership and collaboration. With neighboring United Methodists or our ecumenical and interfaith partners to make ministry happen. We don't have to do anything alone. In fact, if we are the only ones doing it, we probably need to check ourselves.

We have to live and act like neighbors in house and out of the house. That's why there's this challenge for us to get out of the mirrors of looking at ourselves and get into windows where we can see what's out beyond ourselves.

'L' is about lay ministry enhancement. And in this leg of the journey and this part of the mile, we're talking about the reality that everyone is called by God to serve in some capacity. And not everyone is called to licensed, certified or ordained ministry, yet all ministry is of value and worth pursuing.

We want to celebrate every call and provide tools and resources to support discernment for all of our neighbors. Imagine how much happier you and those around you would be if you enjoy doing what you do. And you felt that God called you to do it just imagine.

So, you have a little while to think about it at annual conference. I'm going to invite every congregation, every single congregation, every ministry setting within the Greater Northwest to select at least one person that you will intentionally pray for and pray with

As they discern God's call for them, every ministry setting, again, this is not about certified, licensed, ordained ministry; it may end up there, but that's not the goal. That's not the goal, we're not gonna get excited about that. Right? We have a process for that already, what we don't have a process for, it's for acknowledging the call of everyone. And that's what this is about.

Somebody say 'E.' 'E' is about the elimination of racism.

You knew we were not going to get through this entire service and not talk about racism.

But as we do this grand necessary work, of eliminating racism, we're going to examine our policies, our practices, and behaviors that perpetuate racism. And make the changes and reparations necessary to move us toward a just and equitable space and reality where all are truly included in this neighboring enterprise.

M.

I.

L.

E.

Who's willing to stay on this side of the road and journey this mile with me?

Who's willing to give the Samaritans in your life a chance for this mile?

Who's willing to love God and love neighbor on this mile?

Who's willing to go and do likewise by praying with your feet, healing with your words, and loving with your resources?

Beloved, it's only for a mile.

Who will go and do likewise?

Amen.