

## **Christ in Crisis: Who is my neighbor?**

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*Living God, may your word be proclaimed and may we claim it with joy for our lives today. Continue to speak to us through my words or in spite of them. Amen.*

Luke 10:25-37 (CEB)

I shared with you all in the weekly newsletter that we are starting a new sermon series today: Christ in Crisis. What I didn't mention was that we originally intended to preach this series three months ago, right after Easter. At that time, we were just a few weeks into the stay-at-home order and were scrambling to adjust to a radically different way of life and church. We were, you could say, in crisis. Pastor Steve and I agreed that it seemed ill-advised to pile a series on crisis on top of this very real crisis we were experiencing at the time.

And yet. Here we are, months later and still, in many ways, in crisis. We may not be reeling from this crisis like we were around Easter time, but it hasn't gone away. Crisis has just become our "new normal," so our delayed series is here, and we'll spend the next eight weeks talking about Christ in crisis...in crisis.

The title "Christ in Crisis" comes from a book written by Jim Wallis last year. I mentioned in that same newsletter note that I thought the title was a little misleading. I felt vindicated when I listened to a book interview with Jim Wallis at Trinity Wall Street Episcopal Church. One of our most brilliant living theologians, the Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas was the interviewer, and — sure enough — her first question was about the title. She challenged him, saying, "Jim, Christ isn't in crisis. Christianity is in crisis. Why didn't you call this book Christianity in crisis? Or do you think Christ is in crisis?" Jim Wallis readily agreed with her assessment that it is Christianity indeed that is in crisis and clarified that the question he was trying to ask in that title was, "What does it mean to follow Christ in this crisis?"<sup>1</sup> In other words, he was asking who Jesus Christ is in the midst of this crisis today — Christ in crisis — and what does our loyalty to that Christ require of us today?

The more I think about it, the more appropriate it seems to have this conversation now. If we are going to spend eight weeks exploring key questions Jesus asked or prompted others to ask so that we can discover this Christ in crisis, then what better time to do that than in the midst of crisis. The reality is, we are living in the midst of multiple crises — the global pandemic is just the latest one. That layers on top of our existing and unaddressed crises of economic inequality, racial injustice, pervasive violence in our homes and on our streets, ecological devastation, political polarization, increasing militarization, degradation of public civility and decency, and the relativization of truth, to name just a few. We can point to all of these and name them as political, societal, or even moral crises, but I suggest to you that, above all of that, when we look at the full picture, we are in a spiritual crisis. I appreciate this reminder from the Letter to the

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<sup>1</sup> [HTTPS://WWW.TRINITYWALLSTREET.ORG/VIDEO/CHRIST-CRISIS-CONVERSATION-JIM-WALLIS-AND-VERY-REV-DR-KELLY-BROWN-DOUGLAS](https://www.trinitywallstreet.org/video/christ-crisis-conversation-jim-wallis-and-very-rev-dr-kelly-brown-douglas)

Ephesians: “We aren’t fighting against human enemies but against rulers, authorities, forces of cosmic darkness, and spiritual powers of evil in the heavens.”<sup>2</sup>

It is an over-simplification to say that this state we’re in is the fault of a virus or that bad person over there or this or that unjust public policy or even whichever elected official you prefer to blame today. Let me be clear: Fault does lie in all of those places. But this crisis we’re in today, this crisis of the cumulative crises we’ve largely normalized, this crisis is rooted in our crisis of faith. When all of the layers are peeled back, we are faced with a choice: Will we, as people who call ourselves Christians, choose to follow Jesus Christ over and above all else? You see, I would suggest to you that we have, at best, relegated Christ to an after-thought and, at worst, reshaped and reimagined Christ to fit our desired societal, political, and even moral outcomes. This journey we’re going on these next eight weeks is about re-examining who Christ is — not just an intellectual understanding of the historical Jesus, but who Christ is *today* and wrestling with the implications of that revelation, for it is never enough to just know Christ — we are called to follow Christ.

We start with the first question: Who is my neighbor? The scripture passage read this morning is a familiar one, the story of “The Good Samaritan.” Jesus tells a tale about a man who was beaten, robbed, and left on the side of the street to die. One after another, people pass by. These supposedly religious, righteous men deliberately cross to the other side of the road to avoid getting entangled in that mess. Then, in the moment we’ve been waiting for, an unlikely hero steps up — a Samaritan. He takes care of the injured man, and we all learn something about compassion, mercy, and love.

It is easy to overlook the question that prompted Jesus to tell this story. What does it say? “A legal expert stood up to test Jesus...” They go back and forth about the Law and how we’re supposed to love God and neighbor, ending with this: “But the legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” In other words, this story is prompted by a lawyer who says to Jesus, “OK, so if I want eternal life I’m supposed to love God and neighbor, but I need you to be a little more precise so that I’m clear on what I’m required to do here.... Exactly *who* is my neighbor?” Or to strip away the polite veneer, the lawyer is asking, “Who is *not* my neighbor? Who does not deserve my love?” or even, “Who can I still hate?” As I read this encounter, it seems to me the inquirer was less interested in expanding his notion of neighbor and instead looking to restrict it.

Who is my neighbor? That is the question asked. And so Jesus tells us this story, and the answer becomes clear, or at least we like to think it’s clear. The story of the Good Samaritan is widely known, even beyond Christian circles. I completed my chaplaincy internship at a Good Samaritan hospital, one of many with that moniker. Countless charities worldwide operate under some variation of the “Samaritan” name. Animal sanctuaries and pet adoption agencies have even taken up the mantle of “Good Samaritan” to describe their work. Right here in Indianapolis, we have multiple churches, senior living communities, nonprofit organizations, and even a law firm operating under the name and inspiration of this timeless tale. Even political

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<sup>2</sup> EPHESIANS 6:12 (CEB)

leaders both here and abroad regularly appropriate the parable in their otherwise secular speeches. We've heard this story in varying forms, again and again, and the message seems to be a vague affirmation of doing good, helping the stranger, and just being generally charitable... and, let's be clear, we always see ourselves as the Samaritan in this story, right? Perhaps, though, we have heard this story so many times it's lost its provocativeness, its challenge for us today.

Jesus is asked, "Who is my neighbor?" or, as we've already established: "Who can I justify not loving?" He responds by telling a story not only about compassion for a stranger but one with shocking characters. The whole idea of the "good Samaritan" is absurd and even offensive. Jesus chose as his protagonist someone who was despised and, as we would say today, "othered". I appreciate how Amy-Jill Levine, New Testament and Jewish Studies scholar, puts this in perspective for us twenty-first century readers. She writes about this notion of the "good Samaritan":

"Today, we use the term as if it were not peculiar. Yet, as far as I am aware, there are no 'Good Catholic' or 'Good Baptist' hospitals; there are no social service organizations called 'Good Episcopalian' or 'Good Mexican' or 'Good Arab.' To label the Samaritan, any Samaritan, a 'good Samaritan' should be, in today's climate, seen as offensive. It is tantamount to saying, 'He's a good Muslim' (as opposed to all those others who, in this configuration, would be terrorists) or 'She's a good immigrant' (as opposed to all those others who, in this same configuration, are here to take our jobs or scam our welfare system...."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus answers this question with a story about someone whose very identity generally provokes disgust or, at least, hesitation, and tells us *that* is who our neighbor is. He responds to this disturbing suggestion that our love of neighbor can be justifiably limited by making it clear that everyone deserves this love, whether they are our neighbor down the road or the foreigner in our midst, the Christian and the Muslim alike, the politically like-minded and the radical agitator, the law-abiding citizen and, yes, even the terrorist. This parable reveals that neighbor, by God's standards, encompasses boundary-crossing, looking beyond our social, ethnic, and national divides to see the sacred humanity in even a hated outsider. Jesus takes the lawyer's carefully crafted question and answers it an expansive and highly unsatisfactory way, but he doesn't stop there.

You see, it's not enough to ask the question. We must ask the *right* question, and Jesus' long-winded response reveals that the right question was not asked to begin with. The legalistic inquiry centered around this question of "Who is my neighbor?" but Jesus re-writes it as "What does a neighbor do?" He tells this story of the hated "other" as an example of who our neighbor is, but then he goes beyond that to show us what it means to be a neighbor, as this "good Samaritan" goes out of his way to serve and care for another "other." It's not enough to know who we are supposed to love. We must actually do the loving. This idea of "loving neighbor" is not some abstract, intellectual concept or theoretical ideal. No, Jesus answers the question the lawyer should have asked to make it clear that "loving neighbor" is something that must be

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<sup>3</sup> AMY-JILL LEVINE, *SHORT STORIES BY JESUS: THE ENIGMATIC PARABLES OF A CONTROVERSIAL RABBI* (HARPERONE, 2014), 74.

lived, enacted, enfleshed. He doesn't end this debate by saying, "Now you know who your neighbor is." Instead, Jesus ends with an imperative, "Go and do likewise."

We hear that we are to love God and love our neighbor, so we understandably ask, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus tells us, "Everyone. Now go and be a neighbor." As I wrestle with this question and the answering parable, I'm cognizant that it's relatively easy to embrace this *idea* of loving my many neighbors. It's much harder to actually do it. I suspect most of us in the Church would agree that we're called to be people of love, so we reject hatred of the "other" and regularly tout the ways we welcome all people into our space. However, there are two fallacies to our approach: First, this parable reveals that neighbor-ing requires more than opening our doors where we're at; we must go out of our way and go to our neighbors. Second, we're not called to "not hate" our neighbor; we're called to love them.

To understand the first critique, we must look to our history. If Jesus is telling us that neighboring is inextricably tied to loving those who are different from us, then we better look beyond our geographic neighbors, especially in a city like Indianapolis. We know that our daily lives are defined by residential, economic, and religious segregation, segregation that did not happen by accident but was rather purposeful and enacted in such a way that it is long-lasting and very hard to undo. If we simply stay where we are, even with doors wide open, we are limiting our conception of neighbor to those who are most like us.

We're in the middle of a census right now. The last one was ten years ago, and researchers then examined the data revealed in that census to tell us more about who we are and how we live our lives. One of those projects was on segregation — something we like to think went away in the 70s. However, this research revealed that segregation is dying a very, very slow death. Professors at Brown and Florida State University analyzed the census data of metropolitan areas across our country, creating what they called a "dissimilarity index." The idea was to identify what percentage of one group would have to move to a different neighborhood to eliminate segregation — sort of a busing concept, but on the societal level. Indianapolis showed up as number eleven in their results of the most segregated cities in America, with a dissimilarity score of 64.5%, considered extremely high.<sup>4</sup>

If we take seriously this notion of loving our neighbors, as painted by Jesus' provocative parable, then we cannot be content with the limitations of our geography. Gustavo Gutiérrez, another brilliant living theologian and professor just up the road from us at Notre Dame, said, "The neighbor... is not [the one] whom I find in my path, but rather [the one] in whose path I place myself, [the one] whom I approach and actively seek."<sup>5</sup> We cannot do what Jesus is telling us to do unless we are actively disrupting our normal, daily, homogenous paths, and that takes work.

Regarding the second fallacy: to quote Jim Wallis, "The opposite of loving your neighbor is not always hating them, but just being indifferent to them."<sup>6</sup> It's not enough to reject hatred of the

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<sup>4</sup> [HTTPS://WWW.BUSINESSINSIDER.COM/MOST-SEGREGATED-CITIES-IN-AMERICA-2011-3](https://www.businessinsider.com/most-segregated-cities-in-america-2011-3)

<sup>5</sup> GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ, *A THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION: HISTORY, POLITICS, AND SALVATION* (ORBIS BOOKS, 1988), 113.

<sup>6</sup> JIM WALLIS, *CHRIST IN CRISIS: WHY WE NEED TO RECLAIM JESUS* (HARPERONE, 2019), 43.

“other” while still tolerating their pain and suffering. We can't love our neighbor while passing off their struggles as someone else's responsibility. I started today by outlining the many crises of our time: a global pandemic, economic inequality, racial injustice, pervasive violence, ecological devastation, political polarization, increasing militarization, degradation of public civility and decency, and the relativization of truth, to name just a few. As we hear this challenge to love our neighbor, to be a good neighbor, we must recognize that these problems are not simply someone else's problems. It's tempting to ignore the things that seem to not affect us directly, and — if we're honest — the privilege most of us carry allows us that indifference. However, the gospel of Jesus Christ requires us to recognize and examine our privilege AND hear the cries of those who don't have the luxury of ignoring these crises of our day. To be a good neighbor, to love our neighbor, means that we can no longer only look out for ourselves but we must prioritize the needs of the most hurting, the most vulnerable, the most despised.

Last Sunday at our evening book study, we were discussing the ways systemic racial inequality shows up, and one of our wise church members reflected aloud on her own learnings about these injustices. She recalled how, over the years, her financial advisor would brief her on changes to financial policy, tax codes, etc. and, almost always, say something to the effect of, “But don't worry. This is good for you.” Over time, that begged the question, “If it's good *for me*, then who is not good for?” The answer she discovered was discomfoting, as it became apparent that financial gain for the privileged is at the expense of so many others. I appreciated that honesty.

Loving our neighbor — it's not enough to simply reject hatred if we allow indifference to continue. Loving our neighbor requires us to actively choose a different way. Sometimes I hear people suggest that politics have no place in the Church, but, friends, I don't know what to tell you. I have yet to discover a way of living that takes seriously these teachings of Jesus and doesn't have political implications. We are called to love our neighbor, so that means changing our public policies, even changing the way we vote. It means prioritizing the economic good of people who don't live in the affluent neighborhoods surrounding our church building. It means prioritizing creation care across our common life for the good of people whose neighborhoods have been dumping grounds for our toxic waste for far too long. It means prioritizing racial justice in our legal system for the good of people whose skin color has all but assured their incarceration or even death. It means prioritizing in our laws and public policy care for the marginalized, for religious minorities, for immigrants, for all of the “others” in our midst. It means *insisting* that our elected leaders govern in a way that not only says but shows we love our neighbors — *all* of our neighbors.

Jesus said to the trying lawyer and to us who struggle to hear today, “Go and do likewise.” I told you in my newsletter note that I believe we're in the business of Good News, and the Good News of this crisis is the opportunity we have. Friends, we have an opportunity to choose a different path, to discover Christ in crisis, and follow Jesus in this way of love that will transform us and transform the world. That is Good News! Thanks be to God.