

From the Desk of Rev. David Baer
Stated Clerk
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*[Jesus said,] "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy."
Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."
- Luke 10:36-37, NRSV -*

Dear Friends,

The election this week set me to thinking about our role as a church in the days that lie ahead of us, and I keep coming back to Jesus' teaching about love for our neighbors. Not as a platitude, or a nice sentiment, but love for neighbors as a commitment to tend to the most vulnerable among us.

One time a lawyer asked Jesus to tell him what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." But it seems the man got stuck on the word neighbor. According to the Great Commandment, a neighbor is someone who deserves to be treated on an equal footing and loved in equal measure with oneself. But this is difficult! Surely there must be limits, the man thought. **There must be some place I can draw a circle** and say, "The people inside I will love as myself. They are my neighbors. Everyone else is a stranger, and I don't need to love them as I love myself."

So he asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Maybe he thought Jesus would say, "Your family" or "your village" or "the Jewish nation." Those are understandable boundaries. At the edge of one of these groups, perhaps, the duty to love others as oneself might come to an end.

But **Jesus doesn't give him a boundary, a limit to the commandment to love.** Instead he tells a story, where a hated, feared Samaritan is the one who stops to care for a victim of robbery and violence. The Samaritan does this at risk to himself—he doesn't know where the robbers are, or even that this isn't a trap. He does this for someone he has no affinity with—someone who is not a member of his family or village or nation. (In fact, in Jesus' story, the priest and the Levite, who at least shared his nationality and ethnicity, left the victim for dead.) Jesus asks the lawyer a question of his own, not "Who is my neighbor?" but "Who acted as a neighbor?"

The lawyer answers correctly: "The one who showed him mercy." "Go and do likewise," Jesus says.

I wonder what boundaries we feel tempted to draw as we define our neighborhood, the scope of those we are commanded to love. Is it family? Community? Nation? Or, as with the Good Samaritan, ought the presence of vulnerability or need itself be enough for us to recognize a neighbor?

From the Desk of Rev. David Baer (continued)

Jesus won't allow us to build walls or draw borders that put others outside our duty to love them as ourselves. The good news of Jesus is that despite our sin and unworthiness, God loves and chooses us. God only asks that we turn and lavish the same grace and generosity on others—deserving or not, “one of us” or not, safe or not.

If you are feeling vulnerable at this time, I hope that your church community will meet you with this kind of grace and care. It is good to gather every Sunday to remember Jesus' resurrection, to sing, to hold hands, and to be strengthened to meet whatever the world may impose on us as those who know we are in the keeping of God and of one another.

Maybe your life circumstances are such that your cup is running over right now, and you have time and space to care for neighbors inside and outside the church. May God strengthen you for this ministry. I suspect, though, that most of us fall somewhere in between. Please know that you are not meant to love your neighbor out of your emptiness, but out of the fullness of God poured out on you through your relationships with others. Even the Samaritan shared the work of caring with the innkeeper! The work of loving that God calls us to is meant to be shared. Let's support one another, let's breathe together, let's pray with and for one another.

There is a lot of not-love abroad in the world. Let's be God's witnesses to love.

Grace and Peace,

Rev. David A. Baer, Stated Clerk