

Love Thy Neighbor, Part 2:
Neighbors Past, Present, and Future

[Luke 10:25-34](#)

August 20, 2017

Rev. Abigail Henderson

This is week two in a three-week series titled “Love Thy Neighbor.” Last week, in the wake of events in Charlottesville, I reflected on how, in turbulent times, Jesus went to the well of Jewish wisdom and reminded us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. I offered that we cannot begin to love our neighbors unless we are rooted in that biblical truth that all of us—*all* of us, no exceptions—are God’s beloved. That is the promise God makes to us, and it’s our challenge to live as if that is actually true. I encouraged us to stay anchored in the biblical promise of love, so that we have the moral courage to face the dissonant time we’re living in, when the gap between *what the world is* and *what it should be* is so large.

Now, with that as our grounding, I want to share a story about a time when I found myself caught in that gap, acutely. Maybe my

story will remind you of a similar experience, because versions of this story take place every day across our country.

It was about ten years ago, which feels like eons but actually isn't. I was a student at Harvard Divinity School and living in the Boston metro. One of my roommates was my best friend from college, and she had to have major knee surgery. She'd been recovering at home for about twenty-four hours, and we realized she was running a high fever. Per the discharge instructions, I loaded her into my little Toyota Corolla and drove her back to the hospital.

She'd had the surgery done at a top-ranking, university-affiliated medical center that also happened to be the largest safety-net hospital and Level I trauma center in New England. It was a late Saturday night in the middle of the summer.

We spotted the red, emergency-room signs and followed them to a parking garage. I somehow found a wheelchair, got my friend into it, and followed more signs, pushing her down long, fluorescent-lit corridors. I was worried about my friend; she was in pain and the skin above and below her incision was inflamed. I wanted to get her the doctor as quickly as possible.

And then... we were there.

And we couldn't believe it.

The large waiting room was filled with people: men, women, elders, babies. Every seat occupied. A long line of would-be patients snaking away from the triage desk and coiling through the crowd. Bodies literally prostrate on the floor, sleeping or resting or groaning. My friend and I took in the visible injuries and pain and irritation and boredom. Some of those folks had clearly been there for hours.

But you know what made us the most uncomfortable, the most self-conscious, the most nervous?

We were the only white people there. Every other human in that terrible waiting room was black.

And everybody stared at us. And we stared back. Absolutely paralyzed.

A nurse came to our rescue. She herself was black, wearing pink scrubs and looking like she'd had a long day. She regarded us. I'm sure she could see the horror on our faces, the long wait we were anticipating, our discomfort at the entire situation.

“You have insurance, right?” she asked my friend.

My friend nodded.

“Go back out and go to this other entrance,” she said, and gave us instructions.

Silently, I pivoted the wheelchair back around. Eventually, with help from strangers on the street—also black, also very clear about which way we should be going—we found a different emergency room. The emergency room for people who could pay. The emergency room for people who did not rely on state-funded public healthcare.

My friend was seen and re-admitted almost immediately. And she was fine.

I still wonder about all the people in that first waiting room who weren't fine.

As you can tell, my memory of that night is powerful.

See, I grew up in greater Boston, a lifelong member of the United Church of Christ. And I had learned—in school, in local history museums, in church—that there were certain things to be celebrated about where I lived. Before and during the Civil War, Boston was a hub of the anti-slavery movement. Many famous abolitionists, black and white, converged there to strategize, organize, speak, and publish against the sin of human bondage. And our UCC ancestors, the congregationalists, were the first Protestant denomination in America to ordain an African American—Lemuel Haynes in 1785.

All this is true, and good reason to celebrate. *And* it's just one part of a much bigger, much more complex story.

See, I knew *intellectually* that Boston also had a long and terrible history of racial division and oppression, I didn't understand it *viscerally* until I was standing there in that hospital waiting room.

That waiting room was the stark evidence, the poisoned fruit, of generations and generations of segregation in education, housing, employment, income, and faith life. Generations and generations of systematic inequality in healthcare, policing, and visibility. I had lived alongside that reality, even read about it and studied and thought I had wrapped my mind around it like any good socially-responsible liberal.

But I was wrong.

I didn't get it. I didn't begin to get it until I was in that room, and discovered that, unlike everyone else there, I wasn't trapped.

When people talk about privilege, especially white privilege, that's the image that comes to my mind: the fact that my friend and I could leave that room to get what we needed, and no one else there could.

Now, of course there are white people without access to healthcare. And people of color who *do* have that access.

But privilege is not always about what individuals can or cannot do; it's about patterns. Who is more likely to be left on the side of the road, vulnerable and bleeding? Who is more likely to be able to pass on by on the other side and go about their business?

And let's take it even deeper.

Privilege is about who has grown up seeing their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents, and people who look like them, left half-dead by the side of the road.

And privilege is about who has spent generations passing by on the other side, passing that denial or obliviousness down to their children.

What do we think of as normal simply because it's familiar?
Because it's happened over and over again?

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus does something really clever and provocative. He knows that his audience is full of Jews, just like him. He knows that Jews and Samaritans have hated each other for centuries. So he takes the Samaritan, the

“bad guy,” and makes him the “good guy.” There’s a fairly straightforward moral to this story: our neighbors, the ones to whom we owe love and mercy, are not just the people familiar to us, who live near us or look like us or sound like us.

What if we take that step further? What if our neighbors aren’t even the ones who share this moment in time with us? What if our neighbors include the ones who came before us, who helped create this world we’ve inherited? What if some of our neighbors are ghosts?

The ghosts of enslaved human beings.

The ghosts of children torn from parents and sold.

The ghosts of women raped by their owners.

The ghosts of indigenous people who were decimated and displaced by colonists who did not see them as fully human.

The ghosts of so many immigrants from so many places, born on the wrong side of man-made borders, who risked everything in

search of safety and opportunity, whose affordable labor expanded the infrastructure of this country.

The list goes on and on and on.

These ghosts—they were not shown love and mercy. Not by the government of this country, nor its soldiers, nor its police. They were not, generally, shown love and mercy by their white neighbors.

Now, there is an argument that we who descend from those same white neighbors owe nothing to the ghosts and their descendents.

There is an argument that we can continue to pass by on the other side because we are not personally responsible for the first injury, for the original sin.

There is an argument that you can be a hero of history even if your actions left your neighbor half-dead on the side of the road.

And there is an argument that white supremacy is only manifested in violence and Neo-Nazi slogans; that as long as we vote the

right way or have the right friends or say the right thing, we are not shaped by it.

But none of those arguments sound very Jesus-like to me.

Jesus said that a true neighbor, and a true lover of God, shows mercy to the ones who most need it. Jesus said, “Go and do likewise.”

We can’t “go and do likewise” for the ghosts of slaves, Native-Americans, and non-white immigrants. We cannot give them the dignity and opportunities they are owed. That chance is long gone, and the wound left behind is deep and raw.

But we do have neighbors, right here and now, who carry those ghosts and those wounds inside them.

Here’s how I see it: as a white person, I’ve inherited a blighted land, a haunted house. The trauma behind this haunting didn’t start with me, and I know it won’t end with me. It would certainly be easier to ignore the haunting, or claim no relationship to it. To claim that “I don’t see color.” To trust that the problem is

somewhere else, and not in my own heart and in the hearts of other white people I love and respect.

Remember: Jesus was not famous for walking away from things, or denying that a relationship existed, or allowing a problem to belong to someone else. He was famous for walking right into the thick of situations that were uncomfortable and confusing and carried a lot of risk.

This is a challenge for us, I think, as a white church. What does it look like for us to “go and do likewise” for the sake of our neighbors past, present, and future? Because our neighbors aren’t only the living and the dead. We have future neighbors, a world that is not-yet but will-be. In many ways, those future neighbors move my heart with the greatest pity, because they will have to live with our choices.

So let’s make some clear choices, while we still can, about what kind of world we’re building.

I’d like to end with the [words](#) of Minnesota Representative Ilhan Omar, the first Somali-American member of Congress. She said,

It is imperative we collectively overcome and make amends with history. We must confront that our nation was founded by the genocide of indigenous people and on the backs of slaves, that we maintain global power with the tenor of neocolonialism. Our failure to reconcile these facts and our failure to take overt action to correct mistakes further deepen the divide. No one has the privilege of inaction. No one has the privilege of saying this is not their battle. If we are not actively fighting against regressive ideologies, we are contributing to their growth. We must be courageous. We must spread a radical vision of love and unity.

....

It is possible, but it will take a long time — we are trying to undo centuries of institutional and personal hatred and exclusion. This is a generational project; do not underestimate the power of human connection.

Amen.