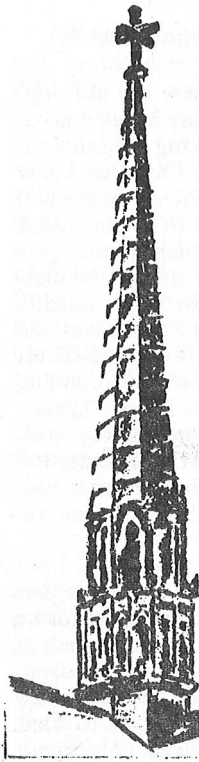

"NEIGHBORLINESS IN TODAY'S WORLD"

A Sermon by

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Scripture Reference: Luke 10 25-37

I was talking not long ago with a friend of mine who is the news director for a large urban television station. He was observing that it appeared to him that something drastic has happened to human nature over the last 25 years. "When I was a child growing up in North Carolina," he said, "the word 'neighbor' really had significance. People cared for each other and were concerned for the problems of others. For example, I remember once when a child on the neighboring farm fell down a well. The whole community stopped what they were doing and pitched into do what they could. If there was a need, a person could count on neighborly support, but today, such compassion for others seems to be disappearing. People can hear of hundreds dying in an earthquake or a plane going down with 200 aboard and not even shed a tear. And there was a story the other day about a woman getting attacked on the street in broad open daylight and crying for help, and by actual count 30 different people saw her plight and yet chose not to get involved." He concluded, "It seems to me that people are not what they used to be when it comes to neighborliness. Something has happened

to man's capacity to care for his fellow man."

Obviously, thoughts such as these are not original with that man. Many of you may have come to the same conclusion just from looking around you. Something has happened between life as we knew it on the farm 25 years ago and life as we know it today. However, before, we jump to a conclusion and say the problem is inside human nature, perhaps we ought to look at another side of the matter; namely, what has happened to man's outside enviroment. It may be difficult to document the internal shifts in man's spirit, but it is not difficult at all to document how the context surrounding man today has changed in the last 25 or 50 years. I suggested to my friend that maybe the key to all this change is not the corruption of human nature, but a radical shift of enviroment that presents contemporary man with challenges unlike any his forefathers ever faced.

In a sense it was ironic that this particular person should have been raising such an issue, for he was part of an enterprise that has done as much as anything to drastically affect our human situation. I am speaking now of television and the network of communication that has shrunk our world to what Marshall McCluan calls "a global village." My friend recalled the time when a neighboring child fell into a well, and the whole community responded. In understanding that event, we must not forget how isolated from the knowledge of other catastrophes those rural people were. They were able to react intensely to that trauma partly because of the smallness of the world they lived in. But today, my friends' vocation has changed that situation drastically. Now we are made aware instantly of tragedies the world over which means we have less emotional capitol to invest in any one situation. To compare the reactions of his neighbors to a child in the well and contemporary reactions to an earthquake in Mexico is like comparing apples and oranges. Quantity and quality are inherently related in every situation and this has to be considered in evaluating our present condition. The other thing that has happened to change us is urbanization. At the turn of this century some 80 percent of Americans lived in towns of ten thousand or less, and in just seven decades that proportion has exactly reversed itself. Today 80 percent of Americans live in one of the large metropolitan groupings of our nation. And the fact that we are so concentrated together has had a tremendous effect on our modes of relating to each other. I read a study not long ago that indicated that the average rural inhabitant of America around the turn of the century knew anywhere from 200 to 400 different individuals in the course of his lifetime. Today an urban dweller may well come into superficial contact with thousands more on elevators and busses and at theatres and the like. And once again, such increased quantity will have its impact relationally. You only have so much psychic energy to invest, and if it is spread out over extensive contacts, there cannot be the depth and intensity of relation that was possible in a much smaller context.

The point I am trying to make is that human nature now has to cope with a radically different situation in urban-mass media times. Thus in asking what has happened to neighborliness across the years, in my judgment it is grossly unfair to say simplistically that "people do not care anymore" and are far less humane than their grandparents. What we need to do is face up to the new situation in which we find ourselves, and instead of wringing our hands or pointing our fingers accusingly, ask realistically: what forms of neighborliness are appropriate for today's world? Man is by nature an adaptive creature and if we will put ourselves to the task of shaping the new rather than lamenting the passing of old, I am convinced we can make progress. The need to be neighborly to each other is greater than ever before in our urban society. The challenge is to find forms that will work "down town" rather than "down on the farm."

As a basis for such an attempt, I suggest we turn to that point in scripture where Jesus addressed himself to this question of neighborliness and see if we cannot find some guidelines here that will illumine our thinking. It needs to be noted in passing that the Bible is much more like a compass than a road map. A map is a detailed description of a specific terrain. A compass simply points directions and enables one to get his bearings and then leaves to him the divising of how to negotiate his journey. The Bible was written in a much simplier cultural era than our own time. However, there are certain "fixed points" in the parable of the Good Samaritan that can help us toward an authentic model of neighborliness for our own day. You will recall that the context here is Jesus being asked how one inherits eternal life. He answered with the familiar formulation, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and mind and soul and strength, and thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." The questioner seemed embarrassed by the obviousness of the answer, and so in an attempt to press the inquiry, he asked Jesus for a further formulation of what it meant to be a neighbor. And Jesus responded with the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan. Let's look at it now and seek to discover the contour of neighborliness which can serve as a compass for our own time. In my own judgment there are at least three forms of

neighborliness to be found here.

The first is the most obvious; it is one individual helping another individual in a time of need. You are very familiar with the picture of a man being beaten up and robbed and left on the side of the road for dead. Of three people who came by just after this, Jesus said one acted in true neighborliness, for the Samaritan stopped, inconvenienced himself enough to get involved with the other man's problems, and out of the resources he had with him actually helped the man in a very tangible way. We will never get beyond the time when this form of responsive helpfulness is out of date. Seeing a human crisis and being willing to become involved in the helping process is always going to be foundational neighborliness no matter what the context.

However, in all realism, how is this kind of one-to-one responsiveness to be practical in the city? There are more human needs on some streets than one person could meet in a year. How do you ever get anywhere in a city if you attempt to do what the Samaritan did to every need you met? At this point some principle of selection has to be utilized, and in my judgment, a genuine sense of personal identity is the answer. Coming to terms with my gifts and my limits is imperative if I am going to be an urban neighbor. You see, we are not Messiahs: that is, we do not possess the capacity to solve all the problems we confront everyday. We are keys, capable of fitting only certain locks, and accepting this fact, and being willing to do what I can do with my gifts and resources is the only way not to wind up spattered all over the wall of needfulness.

This is the principle at work in the action of the Samaritan. We often overlook the fact that he was not just willing to help that man, but also uniquely equipped to do what needed to be done in that situation. Of all who passed there, he alone had a donkey, some clothes, and oil and wine. He was capable of a relevant ministry. I got to fantasizing one time about the priest and wondered if we may have been unfair to him across the years. He is always accused of indifference or unconcern, but could it be that his action was a relevant response to the situation? Remember now, the priest had nothing with him but perhaps a scroll. When he saw the injured man he realized he had nothing with him to help. Perhaps he said, "The best thing I can do is go for someone who can help." If that is why he passed by on the other side, only to come back with aid and find the man gone, I suggest he was just as much a neighbor as the Good Samaritan.

The point I am making is that capabilities as well as willingness are involved in neighborliness. And this has got to be the guide for one-to-one helping in the urban situation. If we have the illusion that we can and must solve every problem we encounter, it will not be long before all our efforts will come to naught. In my opinion the demonic tempts us in two ways here. He tries to deaden our sensitivity and keep us from ever getting involved with the needs of others and this often succeeds. But if we overcome that temptation, then he subtly goads us to become over involved and ignore our limits, so that eventually nothing we do amounts to much. We burn out completely in our attempts to help. I repeat: we are no Messiahs, only finite human beings who can do some things, but not all things. And knowing who you are and what you can do is the key to being a neighbor in the city.

Some months ago I was visiting the hospitals and I came up to a stop light over at 8th Avenue and Magnolia. There across the intersection I saw a dismayed-looking woman out in front of her car as steam boiled out from under the hood. I was in a hurry like everyone else, but I sensed that here was someone who had more complexity on her hands than she knew how to handle. So I parked my car and went over and told her that I was not a mechanic myself, but that I would be glad to go to a nearby filling station and bring one back, which I did. I then asked her if I could take her some place, but she declined, needing to stay with her car. However, she did say she had been on the way to the beauty shop and if I would call the operator and tell her that she was going to be delayed, it would really help. I did this. I left that situation behind in my schedule, but feeling good inside, and the point is: I had not solved all that woman's problems. Had I gone to work under the hood of that car, a crisis would have become a catastrophe. However, I was able to go for someone who could help. I was able to use the telephone. And I think this a valid form of neighborliness. It involves a willingness to help and an awareness of one's identity, and this is the first compass point in determining how to be a neighbor in an urban society.

Yet one-to-one helping is by no means the only form that neighborliness can assume. There is a second form in the parable that we oftentimes overlook. I am referring now to the institutionalized help that was given the injured man in the inn to which he was taken. You will recall that after the Samaritan had done all that he could for the man there by the roadside, he put him on his own animal and took him to a nearby inn and linked him up with the helping services that were available there. The next morning when he got

ready to leave he paid the proprietor for this ministry and offered to pay whatever balance was left at the end of the man's confinement. Here is just as valid a form of human neighborliness as stopping to do something for a man by the side of the road. Humanity has learned where its predictable needs are going to arise and developed institutions to meet these crises. This is how hospitals and schools and children's homes have come into existence. And we need to realize that the developement and support of these kinds of institutions is as legitimate a form of human helping as a direct service one-to-one. All the people who conceive and structure and work in helping institutions are "neighbors" in the finest sense of that word, and so are the people who give to these organizations to make such services available. Let's face it: none of us have either the competence or the time to meet many of the complex needs of today's society. Only by facilitating helping institutions can this be done, which means corporate endeavors are as much an expression of neighborliness as bandaging up a man by the side of the road.

It is in this sense that I think organizations like the United Way are utterly essential to a community's welfare and a very legitimate concern for religious people. You have inserted in the order of service this morning a card about the sixty-seven different helping agencies that live out of the stream of the United Way. I see this as a valid expression of God's work and am personally grateful that there is such a mechanism in our community that enable such variety of human helpfulness to be organized and sustained in a cohvert way. The developement and the support of institutions like the inn to which the Samaritan took the injured man is the second form of neighborliness our new enviroment calls us to create.

But there is yet a third form that is admittedly not mentioned in the parable, but it is real in an implicit sense. I am thinking now about a concern for the Jericho Road itself, and how the causes of the brutality that occurred there could be attacked. I wonder if the Samaritan gave this any thought as he left the inn that morning? He had effectively ministered to a victim of a bad situation, but if he were profound at all, he must have asked the question: what can be done to keep this from happening again and again? Would better police portection, or work with juveniles who become robbers be in order? I do not know if the Samaritan thought this way at all; however, if he did not, he should have, for here is a dimension of the problem that must be faced if real progress is to be made. There is a difference between social service and social action. One focuses on effects, the other on causes. And I would be the first to admit that social action is the most complicated of all, but it must be done. To limit neighborliness, especially in the city, to one-to-one helping and social service is like putting bandages on a cancer. Only surgery can fundamentally turn the situation around, and this is hard for us to accept out of our pietistic religious background that separates church and state, and the world. Projects like better schools and better police services and better forms of public justice seem far afield from religion to most of us in our tradition, but I submit to you that this must change if the task of neighborliness is to succeed in the city. Deitrich Bonnhoeffer was right in observing that "man lives from outside in as well as inside out." This means that the social structures of society affect individuals just as individuals affect the social structures. And some attention has to be given to this corporate dimension of life if our society, as a whole, is to survive. Some form of enlightened public policy and political justice must be included in any wholistic view of neighborliness.

Which brings me back to where we started, and my friend's observation that human nature has changed drastically in the last 25 years. Is that true? To be sure, things have changed, but is it because the inside of men has gone corrupt, or the fact that the outside enviroment has been altered so that we have not yet learned how to be neighborly in the new setting? I, for one, understand this change in the latter sense, which is why I have preached this sermon. Our need today is not for lament or accusation, but understanding and imagination. Listen, our part of the world has been thrust into a new era in the last 25 years. Because of television and urbanization, the context for our lives is radically different. But the glory of man is that he can adapt and grow, and this is as possible in our ways of relating to each other as in any facet of our lives. Neighborliness in today's world, like everything else, is not simple or exactly what it used to be. But it can be achieved, and Jesus' parable is a compass to point the way. Here is one-to-one responsiveness based on willingness and a clear identity of gifts and limits. Here is social action, asking what could be done about the Jericho Road to make it more safe for living things. All of these constitute the new mode of neighborliness in our kind of world, and each of you can participate in all three. You can be sensitive to your own gifts, supportive of helping institutions, and participate in relevant social action. This is the way in our time to do what Jesus commanded: to love our neighbor as ourselves!