



## It's All About You

*TEXT*  
*Luke 10:25-37*

October 2, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

**T**he observance of World Communion Sunday originated in the Presbyterian Church. On the first Sunday in October 1936, after the world had warred the first time, Communion was celebrated in Presbyterian churches across the United States and around the world. It was a symbolic gesture reminding ourselves and declaring to the world that we belong to one another. By 1940, the Federal Council of Churches, later known as the National Council of Churches, worked to broaden the practice among other denominations. Today, there will be Christians across this country and around the world who will share the body of Christ. Like a dress rehearsal for the banquet we will all share in heaven, we come to the table like neighbors, like friends.

I am wondering, on this World Communion Sunday, what does it mean for us to be Christian today? There was a time when I thought that confessing Jesus as my Lord and Savior did it. I still think that, but I have learned something about that confession. I have learned that for Jesus

to be Lord means that Jesus' life shapes every moment. The Christian life requires more than my standing before the Session once and saying as much; the Christian life requires my standing before God every day and striving to be faithful.

There was a time when I understood my faith in intellectual terms. Being Christian was about getting my beliefs right. But following Jesus is about more than just a matter of the mind. The more I think about it, I don't know too much about what Jesus thought. I know a good bit more about how Jesus lived — which is to say how he treated others.

I have come to resonate with Maya Angelou, who once said, "When people tell me that they are Christian, I think to myself, 'Already?'" I like that. Am I saved, am I redeemed, am I claimed by God's grace? Absolutely! Am I Christian? I am on the way.

So what does it mean to be Christian in our time? I think the parable gives us some insight.

The lawyer had a question for Jesus. The law he knew backwards and forwards was Torah. He asked Jesus about

eternal life. But Jesus put the question back to him: "What do *you* think?"

Our Bible scholar quotes scripture. *You shall love God with all that you are; and love your neighbor as yourself.*

Jesus says, "That's exactly right." It would have been a good place to stop.

But it's hard to stop when the teacher tells you how smart you are. So he asks another question: "Who is my neighbor?" Of all you people out there, how am I supposed to know which ones matter the most to me? Do I love neighbors who live near me? Do I love neighbors who need me the most? Do I love neighbors who share my view of the world, members of my family? I can't love everyone, so how do I know who is my neighbor and who is not?

In Jesus' day, as well as in ours, meaningful relationships — neighbors — were often understood to be those who had a capacity to mutually enrich each other. They were not one-way relationships; they were reciprocal.

We all have friendships like this. This is actually our predominant form of friendship. Most friendships have some

give and take. We do dinner at your house this time; but you do dinner at our house next time. That's healthy. That's good. There is a bond in sharing the load of life with one another ... some reciprocity. It's less common to have friendships where you pick up the lunch check every single time. It happens, but it's less common.

Reciprocal relationships are good. But Jesus has something else in mind.

There was a man going from Jerusalem to Jericho, he said. He's beaten and left for dead. A priest comes by, then a Levite. You know this story: They pass by on the other side. Why do they do that?

Well, they had their reasons. You may not think they are good reasons, but they had their reasons. Religious purity law, recorded in the same book that says we are to love our neighbor,<sup>1</sup> forbids a priest from touching a corpse, even if it is a family member. Much of the law existed to limit contact of the righteous with others.<sup>2</sup> So when a priest or Levite sees someone who may be dead already, passing by may be what should be expected.<sup>3</sup> They may have wanted to stop and help, but they were called to be obedient to the law.

Others say, "Hogwash!" They find it shocking that allegiance to ritual purity would be used as an excuse for failing to help someone in need. Some say any good Jew would stop.<sup>4</sup>

That makes sense to me, but what I find most compelling is the fact that the priests

are caught between "duty and duty."<sup>5</sup> There is the duty to follow the purity laws and the duty to help one need. How do you choose?

The church I served in Jacksonville sat on a corner of a public park which was often inhabited by homeless folks. One Sunday morning, a fellow from the park walked into our worship service while the choir was singing. He walked down the aisle, knelt on the front step and opened his arms wide and cast his eyes to the ceiling. No one was listening to the choir anymore.

Davis, one of our ushers, came down and escorted the man out of the chancel. They gave him a cup of coffee, and before long, he found his way back to the park.

Everything worked out OK, but it raised a debate in the congregation: What was the Christian thing to do? "He just came to pray," Doug said. "It's a house of prayer. Who were we to escort him out?"

Sylvia said, "He's welcome, but he should not disrupt the entire service. Everyone came to pray, but no one can pray with him up there. It's too uncomfortable." Duty and duty — how do you choose?

We all know about that. The kid's game is beginning, and you are still at work. Duty and duty — how do you choose? No matter what you choose, you will unavoidably pass by on the other side of one duty or the other.

So Jesus asks, "Who was the neighbor?" It's an easy call

for our Bible student: the one who showed him mercy.

The lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Among all those people out there, what characteristics do they need to qualify as my neighbor? Is it my kin or my tribe or my family? Is it those who can reciprocate neighborliness? Is it those who are in need, and likely have no capacity of reciprocity at all? No matter how you answer it, you will end up with neighbors and non-neighbors.

The lawyer asked, "Who is my neighbor?"

But Jesus asks, "Who *was* the neighbor?" Do you hear it? It turns the question upside down. The lawyer is looking at them; Jesus is looking at us. When it comes to determining the neighbor, Jesus says, it's all about you. You be the neighbor.

Jesus says neighborliness is not determined by the characteristics in them, but rather by the characteristics in us. If I understand the text, the point of this story is that there are times when we must choose to be Christian with our lives. It's not about who *they* are; it's about *us*. There comes a time when we need to choose to live as faithfully as we know how to live — no matter how others are choosing to live.

Let me ask you a question: How many of you have joined this church in the last ten years or so? There's a story about Village that I want you to know.

I am thinking about it because we are installing this

magnificent instrument in this remarkable room. And we are completing our work at the Meneilly Center. But ten years ago, we were starting our work down there. We wanted to build a new building for the food pantry. Some of our neighbors didn't like the idea. Almost overnight, there were yard signs reading "Village Church: Respect Thy Neighbor." There was a website launched to stop our construction. Someone filed a lawsuit to stop us from moving forward.

There was a very important night with our Session. We were trying to figure out how to respond. For a while we were thinking, we need to set the record straight. We need to write editorials to the paper; we need to confront falsehood with truth. There were a couple of people, and only a couple of people I believe, who were sharing misinformation, but there were hundreds who had bad information. It was a painful time for this church.

But then the meeting changed. We said, we need to remember that there are more people in our community who would want us to serve the hungry than not. There are more people in our community who want us to be compassionate than not. So we chose to do nothing that might disparage our neighbors, even as they were disparaging us.

It was the right thing to do. In time, bridges were built. The family who filed the lawsuit, well, they brought us produce from their backyard garden

to share with our clients. It worked.

But here's the point. It may not have worked, but it was still the right thing to do — because when it comes to defining neighbors, it's all about us. When it comes to building neighbors and neighborhoods ... you are the only one who can be Christian with your life. That is the life Jesus calls us to pay attention to.

Healing and help and justice will not come from discerning anything about them.

It's about us.

Maya Angelou says, "When someone says, 'I am a Christian,' she thinks, 'Already?'"

Maybe it's better to say: "I'm on the way, and I am given another day to confess that Jesus is Lord, and to remember that you and all are my neighbors."

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<sup>1</sup>Leviticus

<sup>2</sup>Luke Timothy Johnson, *Luke: Sacra Pagina*, p. 173

<sup>3</sup>Charles Cousar/Beverly Gaventa, *Texts for Preaching: Year C* (1994), p. 427

<sup>4</sup>Johnson, p. 173

<sup>5</sup>Fred Craddock, *Luke Interpretation Commentaries*, p. 151