

*Justice Southbury presentation*

*January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2025, 2 pm*

*"To Whom am I a Neighbor?" based on the theme*

*"Who Is My Neighbor?"*

*The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor*

*Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut*

"Who Is My Neighbor?" It is an honor and privilege to be invited as the first speaker on this theme as the new year unfolds, and I thank Rick Richardson, a member of our church, for that invitation.

In this time of increased tension in our nation and our world, it is a worthy question. Questions still remain from the New Year's Day attack on revelers in New Orleans that killed at least 15 and wounded scores of others, and the December 21<sup>st</sup> attack on the Christmas market in Magdeburg, Germany where 5 people were killed and more than 200 injured. Active wars in Europe, the Middle East and Africa pit people of the human race against one another with death and destruction as a consequence. And in our country, concerns about undocumented immigration and the demonization of those with whom we have a different political opinion seem to continue unabated. Who is my neighbor?, indeed.

In my Christian tradition, and the Hebrew Torah on which that tradition is based, the question is a complex one. Hospitality for the stranger and loving one's neighbor as oneself are scriptural admonitions. But so in other texts are prohibitions that caution against interactions with those who are different, whether those differences are religious or cultural. To assert that everyone is our neighbor can be too glib, thoughtlessly tossed out as a relationship cure-all without any thought as to moral turpitude or integrity. Is Putin my neighbor? Luigi Mangione, who killed United Health Care CEO Brian Thompson? Hamas? ISIS? The 9/11 murderers?

For Christians, the seminal text to address the question "Who Is My Neighbor?" is found in Luke 10:25-37. Rick asked me if I might have a title for my remarks and I said it would be "To Whom am I a Neighbor?," an adaptation of Jesus question at the end of that story. I observe, with a bit of irony, that the question in the story was asked by a lawyer (Rick Richardson is a lawyer)

The old saying is that lawyers don't ask questions that they don't know the answer to, and this is certainly how the story begins. *"What must*

*I do to inherit eternal life?’* the solicitor asks, and Jesus asks him what the law instructs. Quoting from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18, the lawyer answers from the Torah and links love of God and neighbor as the means by which we inherit eternal life. Love is the essence of the law. So far, so good.

But then, seeking to justify himself, the attorney continues, “And who is my neighbor?” So this question, at least in the story and sometimes in our lives, is an effort to limit how much love we extend and to whom; a question designed to get us off the moral hook for the weightier implications of what it is to *“Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.”* (Micah 6:8).

So Jesus does what Jesus often does: he tells a story. All of you likely know it. A man travels from Jerusalem to Jericho, a route known in Jesus’ time to be dangerous. He is robbed, beaten and left for dead. A priest and a Levite (a lay associate) passed by, maybe for all the “right” reasons: to avoid ceremonial defilement if the man was dead, to avoid being targeted themselves, to avoid being detained in whatever their travel plans were. The operative word in my assessment is “avoid.” Religious leaders of whom we might have expected more avoided engaging.

The third traveler, a Samaritan, did not. Devout Jews viewed Samaritans as both religious and political apostates. Samaritans were the descendants of intermarriage between Jews and their Assyrian conquerors in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE and worshiped on Mount Gerizim and not Mount Zion. So lifting up the Samaritan as a paragon of virtue in this story must have been at least startling, if not offensive, to Jesus’ Jewish listeners.

The offense should not be lost on those of us who call ourselves “Christian.” While it may be helpful to ask “Who is my neighbor?,” we need to bear in mind that this was a question designed to limit moral responsibility and self-justify moral rectitude. More importantly, certainly from a Christian perspective and I would argue from a human perspective, is to ask of ourselves the question Jesus asked the lawyer at the end of the story: *“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”* The lawyer replied, *“The one who showed him mercy”* to which Jesus directed *“Go and do likewise.”*

Given our human limitations of time and space, as well as where we are positioned within the communities and institutions of which we are a part, there can be limits on our capacity to extend mercy. Note that the word in the original Greek can also be translated “compassion,” “to suffer with.” So who is the neighbor with whom we are willing to suffer?

Each of us will answer that question as our journey takes us. For us at Woodbury United Methodist Church, and in the wake of over a half-century of denominational discrimination around sexual orientation, we have earnestly engaged a more recent effort to “suffer with” our LGBTQI+ siblings. In June we affirmed locally the national denominational changes that removed harmful language toward these siblings; and that also removed prohibitions on marriage and clergy ordination for LGBTQI+ persons. Not satisfied to simply make a statement, we now have an Affirmation and Inclusion team that is actively pursuing what it means to be truly welcoming in all aspects of our church life.

One of our young adults asked, *“Are you doing this expecting that LGBTQI+ people will start returning to your church?”* No. While that would be wonderful, it would be insanity to expect that after over a half-century of formally sanctioned discrimination. Instead, we are doing this out of a sense of church integrity: knowing it is long overdue, knowing that we *“passed by on the other side”* for too long before taking up the Samaritan’s role. But since it’s never too late to do the right thing, we are doing it now.

Without question, there are times when evil must be confronted and the loving thing to do is to resist. Reinhold Niebuhr’s theology of “Christian realism” in the 1930’s in the face of the growing menace of Nazism is one such example, one that will resonate with the courage of the Southbury community in resisting the training camp proposed by the German-American Bund in 1937.

More often the challenge is for us to **be a neighbor**, whether in overt acts of care and compassion or a changed rhetoric and attitude toward those who are “different.” There are many ways to “show mercy” as defined this way. Such neighborliness extends far beyond a “Be Kind” mindset, as lovely as that sentiment is. We must intentionally seek and engage those who are different from us. They belong to our race: the human race. They are our neighbors: across the world and across the street. “They” are “we.” We are the neighbors called to be a neighbor.