

Luke 10:25-37

“Focus on the Mission, Part 3: And Serve Our Neighbors”

September 4, 2011

This is the final week of our “focus on the mission,” so by now I’m confident you all know our church’s mission statement by heart. So here goes. Say it with me. The mission of Maple Grove United Methodist Church is:

*to be an open community of Christians  
who love God  
and serve our neighbors.*

A mission statement is what you *do*. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, so much depends on how you hear the exchange between Jesus and the lawyer. The lawyer had asked Jesus, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replied, “What’s written in the law?” The lawyer said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” And Jesus said, “You’ve given the right answer; do this and you will live.” But I’ve always thought Jesus must have said it this way: “You’ve given the right *answer*; do this and you will live.” Hear the difference?

It's one thing to get the right answer; it's quite another thing to *do* the right thing. This emphasis on doing is reinforced by the last thing Jesus says in the story. He's made the lawyer name which of the characters proved to be a neighbor to the man in need. "The one who showed him mercy." And then Jesus finishes him off: Go, he said, and *do* it. When it comes to being a follower of Jesus, and for that matter when it comes to the mission of Maple Grove church, the operative word is not so much what you know or believe, but what you *do*.

When it comes to the call to serve our neighbor, there are three basic responses. One is the response of the Samaritan—who just does it. The other two responses are more common, at least for me. There is the response of the priest and the Levite—who basically *avoid* the neighbor in need. What bleeding man? I didn't see any bleeding man. Oh, that bleeding man? Well, there are many good reasons why I can't serve that man. If I touched him, it might make me ritually unclean and I'd be unable to do my work in the Temple. If I got wrapped up in helping him, it might make me late for my work in

the Temple, and I am needed in the Temple. Sorry, got to go. You know, avoiding.

The final response, that of the lawyer, may be most common of all—having a conscience, after all, he can't just avoid his neighbors altogether. So instead he tries to limit who counts as his neighbor. The question he asks is, "And who is my neighbor?" But what he really means is, "Who is *not my neighbor*?" Who can I get away with not helping? What's the least I can do and still be a good person? You know, limiting your responsibility.

Let me illustrate by thinking about that time of year called the Stewardship Campaign. Everyone, and I everyone, receives a nifty booklet of all the ways to serve through Maple Grove Church—80 or 90 different ministry teams. Literally hundreds of these booklets are distributed. And literally, well, dozens are completed and returned. I haven't been at Maple Grove during the Stewardship Campaign, but I have been at other churches during Stewardship Campaigns, and when you talk to people who haven't turned in their response card, let me guess the sorts of things you hear.

Probably something like this: Stewardship Booklet? What Stewardship Booklet? I guess I didn't get one. Avoidance. And then probably this: Gosh, I'm going to be awfully busy this year. How much would I have to do if I sign up for something? Do you have any "starter" ministries? And by the way, who *is* my neighbor? Limiting.

*Do this, Jesus said, and you will live. Go, he said, and do it.* It sounds pretty simple and straightforward, doesn't it? And any reasons we give for not serving a neighbor sound suspiciously like excuses. But in real life, it's not so easy, is it?

When my mom was in her 70s, she called me and said, "I need to tell you something I did. Last night," she said, "I stopped and gave somebody a ride along the side of the road. It was after dark, on a pretty deserted highway. There was a car parked on the shoulder and an elderly man standing next to it waving me down. (This was before cell phones, so when you were stranded, you were really stranded.) My instinct," she said, "was to stop and help him. But then I thought, 'What if it's a trap? What if robbers are hiding behind the car waiting to jump out? What if he's got a gun?' So I drove on

by. But I just kept thinking, ‘What would Jesus do?’ And I turned around and went back. It turns out that in the car was the man’s wife who was recovering from surgery. They’d broken down on the way to the home of their son, who was going to care for her.”

So my mom drove them twenty minutes to their son’s home, where she was thanked profusely and given a piece of pie. She took the son to the abandoned car and he was able to get it started and drive back.

“I was scared,” she told me, “and it still makes me a little nervous to think about stopping at night like that. But I’m glad I did. So that’s it—I just needed to tell you I’d done that.”

With tears in my eyes, I told her, “I’m proud of you, Mother.” A few minutes later the phone rang again. It was my mom. “You won’t tell your sister, will you? She’d be worried.” “No, I won’t tell her.” A few minutes after that, I called her. “I *am* proud of you, Mother. But you’re not going to be doing that all the time, are you?” “No,” she said, “not all the time.”

*Do this, Jesus said, and you will live. Go, he said, and do likewise.*

Let me tell you about this past Friday. I had a morning appointment, so I got into the office late to start with. Going in I had a to-do list already longer than could be done in one day. The staff had lots of things they needed to talk about. SueAnn was away tending to her husband, which makes everything take just a little longer. The phone kept ringing, emails kept coming in, I had to let some workers in the new parsonage. 2:30 came, I hadn't even started my to-do list, and I still had to make a hospital call and stop by a funeral home. I was finally about to leave to do those things, when someone called and wanted to speak with 'a pastor.' Uh-oh.

She said she had just got into town with a friend and didn't have anywhere to stay. She'd already got a job and would start on Monday. She had a little money for food, but not enough for a place to stay. "I've called *everywhere* but no one has anything. I thought maybe your church could help."

"Where are you?" I asked. "What part of town?"

"I'm downtown, by the library," she said.

"Ah, in that case let me refer you to a church in that area."

Thinking, she's *their* neighbor, not mine."

“But my new boss gave me a bus pass,” she went on. I could get up to Henderson and High, if you could help us.”

“Great. Have you called 2-1-1,” I asked. That’s the number to reach all the homeless shelters and agencies in the city.”

“I called them, I called every shelter directly, I called JOIN, I called the Urban League, and this is the tenth church I’ve called. I just need a room for a night or two.”

“Let me think a minute,” I said. It wasn’t the money. I could find \$40 for a room somehow or other. And it wasn’t that I doubted her story—for a change, I actually believed her. It was the time it would take. It would take at least an hour, probably longer, to wait for her bus to get here, take her to a hotel, gather some money and pay the bill. And I still had to go to the hospital and the funeral home. And my family was expecting me for dinner. And I still had to write a sermon . . . on the requirement to serve our neighbors in need.

“I’m sorry,” I said at last. “If the shelters don’t have any help for you, I don’t believe there’s anything I can do.”

“That’s all right,” she said. But it’s not all right, not really. I wish I’d taken the time. This sermon probably would have been even worse than it is. But I’d have been a better preacher.

*Do this, Jesus said, and you will live. Go, he said, and do it.*

Your pastor had a bad day, but Maple Grove really does know that serving our neighbors is our mission. There’s a youth mission trip and an adult mission trip every year. Every week Maple Grove members sort clothes at the Free Store on Parsons Avenue and run the clothing room at New Life Church on Fifth. Maple Grove members serve meals to kids up on Broad Meadows and take elderly neighbors to church or the doctor. Even at Communion we collect food for the hungry. *Do this, Jesus said, and you will live. Go, he said, and do it. And we are, we are.*

Just so you know, I’m expecting that on September 25 there will be fewer people here than on any Sunday in recent memory. In fact, I’m kind of hoping that is true. Why is that? Well, because some of

our people will be serving breakfast to neighbors with the Clintonville Resource Center. And many, many of you will be down at Fred Beekman Park, walking with Bill Croy to raise money to fight ALS disease. And we're going to count you all as in worship with Maple Grove, because you *will* be in worship with Maple Grove.

And if someone should ask, "Which ones, pastor, proved to be faithful to the mission of Maple Grove Church—the ones in the sanctuary, the ones serving breakfast, or the ones walking so that others might walk too? Here's what I would say: "All of them. All of them are being faithful to the mission."

*Do this, Jesus said, and you will live. Go, he said, and do it.*  
Serving our neighbors is the mission of the church.

Next Sunday we will remember 9-11 with candles and music, with scripture and prayer. It will be a holy time.