My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our minds, hearts, bodies, and spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

We’re wrapping up this week our special sermon series on “How the Church Loves its Neighbors”. You’ll recall that last week we spent some time looking at the story of the Good Samaritan from the standpoint of our actions, and this scene had plenty of that, right? Eleven action verbs, and we looked at how our faith at heart needs to be brought out of our heads and into the world.

But we did not answer the core question that the scribe asks…remember that question? “And who is my neighbor?” Well, it **IS** the people that you meet as you’re walking down the street, as we heard from the Sesame Street song in the children’s sermon, but like all things God, it’s what? <It’s Bigger than that>.

The question today of loving our neighbors, but also defining our neighbors, is a lot like the scribe’s question in our text. It’s a matter of perception and boundaries and about how people treat one another. Some things don’t change much. Like most societies today, first-century Judaism has rules about how priests relate to the faithful, rules about race relations with Gentiles and Samaritans and Canaanites, how men treat women, and many other things that allowed certain groups to establish their positions of power, privilege and prestige. So like today, maintaining boundaries was vital to the social order, at least for the ones who benefit the most. We see that reflected in business and government today, right? The Golden Rule, you know it: Those who have the gold make the rules. But let’s not get sidetracked.

So it’s interesting that the central character in our text is called “a certain man” or person without any further identifiers. Let’s Close our eyes and give yourself an image for this one. Who do we see if we said “a certain man” got stripped, beaten and left for dead? The scene says it was on the road to Jericho, and that was a dangerous road filled with highwaymen. Where might that be today? Dorcester? Does the victim’s race or creed change when we change location? Who do we see if we changed it to Provincetown? Who do we see if we changed it to El Paso, Texas? Who do we see if we change the location to Townsend? Do you see how our prejudices can influence our attitudes toward how we think and feel about a certain scene, because all these things that are not identified in the Bible suddenly become real in our mind’s eye, don’t they. Does that comfort or frighten you (take all answers)? Maybe both. Well, then the Bible maybe is doin’ it’s job, awakening our hearts today.

Who are we in this scene? We certainly are not the priest or the Levite, for sure, the ones who see the need and yet find excuses not to help or render aid, or turn back and get help. Surely not us, Lord. We’re better than that, hmmm? Is that what we’re telling ourselves?

So if we’re not the priest or the Levite, then we are the person in the ditch. And if our perspective is from the one in the ditch, the unidentified one, that would mean that ***we*** are lying there helpless, in need of grace, transportation, assistance in recovery, and an extended period of healing. Any of us ever been in that position, where you’ve been laid low and reliant on others? Yeah?

The one in the ditch doesn’t discriminate among potential helpers. That person isn’t picky, and gets help from whomever stops and shows compassion. Even if that is a Samaritan—remember them? The ones of mixed marriages, from the former Northern Kingdom, unclean in ritual, and who worship God on a mountain rather than the Temple. By depicting a Samaritan as the hero of the story, Jesus says that social status and demographics count for nothing. Anyone who has compassion and stops to help the man in the ditch is his neighbor. Are we the Samaritan? Be careful answering.

What CAN we say about our time of need? Have we ever been laid low, as the man in the ditch? When I’ve been laid low physically, mentally or emotionally, I’ve had the luxury of picking my hospitals, doctors, therapists, and friends. I wanted choices and to keep to people in my clan whom I knew would understand me, a professional middle-aged white male. I’ve never really fallen in the ditch in polite, white Windham and Townsend or the other 6 towns I’ve lived in my life so far. I’ve had some challenges in life, sure….but laid low that I could not get up and go back to my comfort zone? Nah.

So I ask again…have we ever been laid low, so that we might seek mercy from whomever passes by and open our hearts to others whom we don’t know? And if we’re not the man in the ditch, can we really identify ourselves as the Samaritan? Have we ever truly been the *ger*, the stranger, the outsider, the despised one who has none of what the others have, yet we find compassion in our hearts? Or do we come from a position of privilege and react badly to the first little thing that offends us when we encounter someone we don’t know?

We thrive on social division even as we say we seek unity and a level playing field and profess otherwise. We never see life from the perspective of the one in desperate need, because we can’t ever get there. But until we do…until we can put ourselves in another’s shoes…we have no chance at understanding this scene.

Look, Jesus doesn’t say the “Good Neighbor”. By naming the hero of the story a Samaritan, he invalidates the stereotype for Samaritans, sure, but also invalidates all stereotypes of all peoples. Community no longer is defined or limited when we can become the person in the ditch, compassionate to receive mercy, and at the same time become the Samaritan, hated by all we encounter yet still gentle of heart.

How does this then come alive for us? Who can we see as the person in the ditch who transcends these boundaries and also divisions in the world, who teaches us what it means to love everyone even at our own peril?

I had moved from California to Connecticut by the time of the Rodney King beating in 1991. Remember that event? An African American man was brutally beaten by the LAPD for evading and resisting arrest, and it was caught on video. After the officers involved were acquitted of assault, riots broke out across the country. King came out to appeal for calm. He said, “People, I just want to say, you know, can we all get along? Can we get along? Can we stop makin’ it horrible for the older people and the kids??” He was truly, caught on video, the one beaten and left to die. And yet, he wants peace.

The Church loving its neighbors requires that the church, and all that are in it, practice love first. Drop the pretenses. Drop the recriminations. Drop the accusations and the ego. That’s the toughest of all, to be humble to one another and say “I’m sorry, I was wrong”. If we are to love our neighbors, the work starts with us first, to transform our hearts from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh, says the prophet Ezekiel, and then we will see God.

Other people must be treated as beloved of God. If we had something that God had created in our hands, right now, we would be careful with it, cherish it, be gentle so that no bad thing happens to it as best as we can. So why can’t we do that with others, right here, right now? “Loving our neighbor” makes explicit the obligation that the life of another person sets before us. Loving our neighbor “***As Ourselves***” spotlights the existential equality of persons—and too often we lose sight of the precious dignity of those closest to us, seeing our conduct as righteous above all because we put ***our*** feelings first. But Loving One Another as Christ has Loved Us, or *actually doing* and not just saying “How the Church Loves its Neighbor” is the ultimate challenge. And it’s how we respond not to the concept of challenge alone but in the deeds we show each day that will determine whether our church thrives in the coming years.

 I’ll leave us with this final challenge. Stop fooling yourself today by being the Good Samaritan. Because God favors the lowly, not the ones with big egos who have already anointed themselves the hero. Pride gets us nowhere in the Kingdom of God. Well, then, who should we be in this story? The priest? The Levite? How about we be the person in the ditch, and work your way out. Then maybe we can say, truly, that we are NOT the priest or levite or victim, but OK with being a servant of the Lord, the one who accepts mercy, but then in the unwritten epilogue goes on to show it. And then we will be worthy of Jesus’ words to “Go and do likewise”.

Thanks be to God, Amen.