

WELCOME TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD

GENESIS 4:8-9

LEVITICUS 19:13A, 19:18B

LUKE 10:25-37

I have some questions for you.

What do you call 1,000 lawyers at the bottom of the ocean?

1,000 lawyers at the bottom of the ocean is a good start.

Second question, second lawyer joke. What's the difference between a dead dog in the road and a dead lawyer in the road?

There are tire marks in front of the dead dog.

Here's the last one. How can you tell when lawyers are lying?

They are moving their lips.

Lawyers. Attorneys. Doctors of Juris Prudence. Don't we just love them? Actually, I do love one of them (my wife is a lawyer), but that's another sermon for another day. The lawyer in question for today, the lawyer on display, the lawyer up for cross examination, is a lawyer mentioned in the tenth chapter of Luke. But don't all of you who like lawyer jokes get too excited about it. Don't start licking your chops. Before your lawyer anger, lawyer hatred, lawyer animosity surfaces, bubbles up let me quickly point out that the lawyer in question was not a Johnnie Cochran or Kenneth Starr or F. Lee Bailey kind of lawyer, a kind of lawyer everyone loves to hate, except, of course, when you need a good lawyer to get your little red wagon out of trouble. No, you're thinking about the wrong kind of lawyer and the wrong kind of law. This lawyer in Luke 10 was a person who studied biblical law, the torah, scriptural law, the Bible.

Unfortunately, Mr. Bible Lawyer was not a very good lawyer. He thought he was, but he wasn't. He thought he knew, but he didn't. He didn't know as much as he thought he knew and he didn't live half of what he did know. As Fred Craddock puts it, this lawyer just did not get it. He just didn't get it. He did not get the point of what Jesus is about and he did not understand what the reign of God means.

Eduard Schweizer describes the lawyer by observing that he is concerned with the limits of required love. He wants to stop where he is. He argues a lot---to do a little. But Jesus wants to go forward with him. It's going to be a tough case, a hard case, a demanding case, an almost impossible case to win, but Jesus takes the case. Jesus decides to "lay down the law" for the lawyer, the law about who is a neighbor and what it means to be a neighbor. This lawyer, like most everyone else in Israel, had interpreted, understood "neighbor" to be a reference to his own religious community. A neighbor is one of us, he thought. A neighbor is anyone who is Jewish, he concluded.

This inadequate definition of "neighbor" had been floating around for some time. "Segregation between Jews and Samaritans had lasted more than four hundred years by the time Jesus appeared." (Frederick Herzog) But Jesus didn't care much for bad definitions. He thought it was high time someone got out the Webster's dictionary to find another definition for "neighbor." And Jesus just happened to have a Webster's pocket dictionary handy. The definition Jesus found on page 43 was that a neighbor is anybody who needs you. (Frederick Buechner) Let me repeat that. A neighbor is anyone who needs you. That is, anybody who needs you, regardless of their race, class, nationality, university from which they graduated, education (including Duke), regardless of whether they speak southern or northern, no matter if they live in Lizard Lick or Charleston.

According to Jesus, and by the way, I'm not making this up, according to Jesus, there's only one neighborhood which means---which means we are all neighbors. Now there are a lot of so-called neighborhoods in Charlotte: Dilworth, Myers Park, Cotswold, Morrocroft, Ballentine, Quail Hollow, Beverly Crest, Cameron Woods, Piper Glenn, Olde Stonehaven, Providence Crossing, Foxcroft, Sharon Woods, Beverly Woods---just to mention a handful. But the way Jesus sees it they are all psuedo-neighborhoods. According to Jesus, according to what the lawyer was told, there is only one neighborhood, one and only one. And what Jesus is saying is "Welcome to the neighborhood." He is teaching the lawyer that he has to love, actively love, love demonstrated in deeds, he has to love everyone in the neighborhood.

Which brings me to the subject for today: the lawsuit brought by five white families to force Charlotte to return to so-called "neighborhood schools."

I know some of you have had to put up with the headaches of having a child that goes to a school way across town. I am aware of the inconveniences and the headaches. But I'm more than a little worried about how the judge is going to rule and the implications of the ruling. The judge is Judge Potter and I don't have much faith in him. Here's why.

One spring night in 1969, more than 2,000 people pressed into the gym at Quail Hollow Junior High, angry and defiant over Judge McMillian's order to desegregate Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools. They circulated a petition urging school officials to resist what they saw as the inevitable result. "(We) urge you," it said, "to impress upon the court the undesirable disruption . . . which would result from requiring any student . . . to be bused . . . to a school several miles from home." The petition was drafted by a 46-year-old attorney named, get this, Robert Potter.

The judge who is deciding the fate of our school system is the judge who represented white parents angry in 1969 over busing.

Yes, it will take a miracle from God to have a ruling sensitive to the fact that according to Jesus there's only one neighborhood. I'm not sure Judge Potter is all that familiar with God the Judge, particularly God the Judge's rulings on neighborhood matters. And so I'm afraid. I'm afraid Cain is going to keep killing Abel. I'm afraid Leviticus 19 is down the drain, that my poor minority neighbors are going to be defrauded by not getting

a good education. I'm afraid my white neighbors are going to be robbed of the opportunity to love their neighbors as themselves. I'm afraid a lot of big Bible believers like the lawyer in Luke 10 are going to keep on misunderstanding what Jesus is about and what the reign of God means. I'm really scared that no one is going to help the man robbed and and he will be left to die on the Jericho road.

Actually, I'm afraid people are going to be like me before I was bused. In 1972 I was bused to a school right in the middle of a black neighborhood in Winston Salem. It was, as we say, a bad neighborhood. I did not want to go to Hanes High School. I feared for my safety and I didn't want any minority students holding me back from getting a good best education. But-----but it was not long after I started at Hanes that I discovered that black people weren't exactly as I had envisioned them. Oh, they had their bad apples as all races do. However, I found out African Americans were just like me in many ways.

Because of being bused, by the time I was in the eleventh grade I felt compelled, compelled to make sure the Key Club of which I was President was integrated.

What I am saying is that busing changed me, transformed me, opened my eyes. Busing helped me. Busing enabled me to be a better Christian.

Parker Palmer is right. "The way we frame these conflicts over busing" is not appropriate. "We define them as 'zero-sum' games in which each gain for one side is a loss for the other; a game, that is, in which some must lose in order for some to win; a game where it is inconceivable that everyone might emerge with a victory of some sort."

I'm worried not only of what Blacks and Hispanics and Asians and minorities will lose out on if our schools are not integrated; I'm scared of what whites like me will lose out on. My worse nightmare on this matter is that if we no longer bus students to achieve some sort of racial balance, my nightmare is that history will be repeated.

In his book, *Forty Acres and A Goat*, Will Campbell recalls how he saw a fifteen-year-old girl named Dorothy Counts spit upon by a mob in Charlotte, North Carolina, as she approached the school she was determined to attend, her father a saintly Presbyterian minister and professor by her side, whispering as they walked through the angry throng, "Remember who you are. Don't answer back. Remember who you are."

It can happen again. Don't be fooled. It can happen in Charlotte again.

Like Dorothy Counts, we need to remember who we are, God's children who all live in the same neighborhood.

The author, Nikos Kazantzakis, tells of an experience he had when he went back to visit the isle of Crete. As he walked along, an elderly woman passed by carrying a basket of figs. He writes, "She halted, laid down her basket, picked out two beautiful figs and presented them to me. I asked, 'Do you know me, old lady?' She looked at me with amazement. 'No, my boy. Do I have to know you to give you something? You are a human being, are you not? So am I. Isn't that enough?'"

Kazantzakis remarks, "The old lady was right. She is saying, 'You are a child. I am a mother. That's enough. You are a son. I am a father. That's enough. We are brothers and sisters. That's enough. I am your God. You are my people. That's enough.'"

Jesus told a lawyer who didn't know diddly about the reign of God a story about a Good Samaritan who helped a neighbor, a person in need. Too bad Mr. Rogers wasn't around back then. Jesus could have told the lawyer the parable and then threw in a song for good measure. You remember the song.

It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor. Would you be mine? Could you be mine? Won't you be my neighbor?

That's what Jesus was trying to teach that lawyer.

Perhaps Jesus is trying to teach you about the neighborhood too. Or maybe you already know the rules for the neighborhood but are feeling God calling you to do something specific in the neighborhood for a particular neighbor. It could be the case that you have never established a relationship with the developer of the neighborhood. Whatever your situation is, or maybe it's another situation altogether, you may just need to come forward to request prayer, whatever you need to do do it as we sing our hymn of invitation, "More about Jesus."