

Standing in front of the bookshelf filled with board games, it is easy to get pulled off track as I begin remembering playing each one of those games with the kids. I was looking for “*Word on the Street*” to take along when we have “lake week” with our dear friends in a couple of weeks. But then I spotted *Candy Land*, *Uncle Wiggly*, *Arthur Goes to School*, *Monopoly Junior*, *Scattergories*, *Catan*, *Clue*, *Scrabble* and then back to *Word on the Street*.

*Word on the Street* is especially fun when you play with folks whose vocabulary is robust. Or at least if you are lucky enough to have a teammate who regularly does crosswords. *Word on the Street* pits one team against another. The board is designed to look like a street with a grid for each letter tile. A category is announced; the teammates discuss among themselves the best word to fit the category and then the game is set in motion. Each team tries to remove letter tiles from the grid. By removing the letter tiles competitors can’t spell their word and thus lose the game. The word on the street this morning “neighbor.” Jesus asks the lawyer at the conclusion of his story, “*Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?*”

It is kind of crazy that the word on the street is “neighbor” when the original question is about eternal life and how one inherits it. Crazier still is that Jesus doesn’t exactly answer the question but tells a story. And to further mix things up this morning the story that Jesus tells receives an added word as the story has become commonly known as the Good Samaritan.

The word “good” is not part of the parable of Jesus. It is a word that has been added to the story and that has cemented itself to Samaritan and is forever stuck together as if Gorilla Glue was used, Good Samaritan. When Jesus conversed with the lawyer the commonly held understanding was that Samaritans, and Samaria in general, shared nothing with the people of Israel. They are more like polar magnetic opposites. The gospel writer John states it most clearly “*Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans*” John 4:9. Samaritans were a remnant of the old northern kingdom in Israel who defined themselves over and against the people Judah, the southern kingdom. Nothing good could come from Samaria. The animosity was far too great, and the history far too deep, and the divide far too wide.

Such a fixed relationship can only be breached by salvation that comes through Jesus. By his Word. It is in fact his mission that will bring about change. When the Holy Spirit is poured out on Pentecost, the disciples are empowered, they are to be witnesses of the resurrected Lord in Jerusalem and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth! In the previous chapter of Luke’s gospel, the people of Samaria would not receive Jesus. Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem, but the Samaritans will have no part of it. Today Jesus tells a story and the prominent actor in the story is a Samaritan. A bit later in the year we will hear the story of ten lepers who are cleansed and only one returns to give thanks to Jesus. That one, believe it or not, was a Samaritan. And later in the book of Acts we hear tell of the Samaritan Pentecost, where Apostles from Jerusalem go down to Samaria to pray for the newborn Christians and they lay hands on them, and they believe! Samaritans are given a whole new position with Jesus on the scene.

Jesus’ mission is to and for the most unlikely of people, people like Samaritans. His mission is for those whom the dominant society considers to be worthless, people without rank,

class, standing, social acceptance, and people whose nationality is, well, questionable. The biblical language for people like this is “Samaritan.” Jesus is not about rounding them up and casting them out. His mission is precisely to cement them into the structure of daily life and living. To glue them into the fabric of community life. And to welcome them into the family granting them status as heir.

We can’t think about the story, the parable, that Jesus tells about the man who fell among robbers, without thinking about the Samaritan that has come to be known as good. The Gorilla Glue keeps those two words stuck together, Good Samaritan. The irony is that the story is about a man who fell among robbers. The story is told in response to a question about eternal life. The question of the lawyer to Jesus has to do with the law, what it required, and how he should proceed living his life.

Now the lawyer is a learned man. He knows about love of God and love of neighbor. He is aware of Leviticus and Deuteronomy and of the tables of the law. The lawyer knows that there are two tables, that the Ten Commandments speak of love of God and love of neighbor. The commandments which concern the neighbor put a boundary at the edges of our lives.

I imagine this boundary a bit like when Miss Kelly takes the youth group bowling, and when she arranges for the youngest group of kids, she makes certain that the bowling alley puts up the bumpers in the gutters so that kids will have success when they bowl. They may not roll a strike or even a spare, but they will not simply end up in the gutter, a waste of time and energy, and shared experience. The commandments are like that in that they put boundaries up to curb our behaviors.

Such a boundary tells us what we cannot do in relation to our neighbor. We don’t want our neighbors to end up in the gutter, or for their life to be wasted, or for them to be in isolation. We are to love our neighbor. That is not some warm cozy feeling. Now it would be nice if the commandments would tell us what that means. But they do not! We will have to figure that out for ourselves. Not on social media, or turning to some other religious sounding guru, but with our sisters and brothers right here. We know that there are boundaries on our behavior with others. There are things that we should do and there are things that we should not do.

Try to cheat our neighbors out of what is rightly theirs? No

Say mean hateful things about them? No

Make up stories, lie about their behaviors and actions to get them in trouble? No

Help them keep a roof over their head? Yes

Make sure that they can stay together as a family? Yes

Take fresh produce from their garden? No

Take fresh produce to them from your garden? Yes

Invite them to church with you? Yes

Support them in their religious tradition? Yes

Jesus avoids getting into an argument with the lawyer about the many ways one can nuance the law, side steps the whole thing, and tells a story. He tells the story about a man going from Jerusalem to Jericho who fell among thugs, was beaten, robbed, and left for dead. Three people passed by. The first two skirted around him. The third one acted as “neighbor.” And he, believe it or not, was a Samaritan. The lawyer wants to know exactly who his neighbor is then he

can love his neighbor and live! This is very self-serving. He is less interested in who his neighbor is and more concerned about justifying himself. He is only interested in his neighbor if he can get something out of it.

The word on the street this morning is “neighbor.” The question asked by Jesus, “*Which of these three was neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?*” The lawyer gave the correct answer. “*The one who showed him mercy.*” The one who showed mercy has been elevated in status, a Samaritan, is forever known as “good.”

Jesus is the one who through his suffering, death, and resurrection bridges things that divide. This morning, he mends relationships by offering us his forgiveness. By his Word we are justified and are given eternal life and are heirs of his salvation. This is his mission bringing about change. Jesus’ mission is to and for the most unlikely of people, people like you and me. His mission is for all who are deemed worthless, people without rank, class, standing, social acceptance, and people whose nationality is questionable. The biblical language for people like this is “Samaritan.” Maybe you have felt a bit like a Samaritan. Jesus’ mission is precisely to cement us into the structure of daily life and living. To glue us into the fabric of community life. And to welcome us into the family granting us the status as heir. The Holy Spirit has been poured out on us. We are empowered to be witnesses in Jerusalem and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth! We are the ones who will show mercy. We are “neighbor.” And that, that is the word on the street. Amen.