

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 25, 2012**

TIME TO GET INVOLVED

Luke 10:25-37

Tim Winton is one of Australia's most celebrated novelists, with more than a dozen bestselling books and several literary prizes. He is also a Christian. Winton was once interviewed on a TV show down under, in which the host of the program asked him about his faith. The host said: "When you were about five, a stranger came into your home and affected your family quite profoundly. Is that right?"

Winton responded by telling the host how, back in the mid-1960s, his father, a motorcycle cop, had been hit and thrown from his motorcycle by a drunk driver. He was in a coma for weeks. Finally he was allowed to go home. But Winton remembers: "He was like an earlier version of my father (but not the same). He was sort of recognizable, but not totally my dad. Everything was busted up and they put him in the chair.... I was terrified."

Winton's dad was a big man, and his mom had a great deal of trouble bathing him each day. Tim was just five at the time, and there was nothing he could do to help. Word of the family's situation got out in the local community where they lived in Perth, and a short time later, Winton recalled, there was a knock at the door. The stranger at the door said to Winton's mother: "O, g'day, ma'am. My name's Len. I heard your hubby's not well. Anything I can do?" Len Thomas was from a nearby church. He had heard about the family's difficulties, and wanted to help. "He just showed up," Winton said, "and he used to carry my dad from bed and put him in the bath, and he used to bathe him – which, in those days, where we lived, was not the sort of thing you saw every day."

This simple act of kindness from a single Christian, had a powerful effect. "It really touched me," says Winton, "in that, regardless of theology or anything else, watching a grown man bother, for nothing, to show up and wash a sick man – you know, it really affected me."

Len Thomas showed himself to be a good neighbor to the Wintons, wouldn't you say? Like a good neighbor, Len Thomas was there, willing to help in any way he could. We would all like to have a neighbor like that, wouldn't we? But Jesus – doesn't He say that the really important thing is to *be* a good neighbor like that? Len Thomas didn't help out the Wintons "for nothing" – that is, for no reason. He had a very good reason. He did it out of love. He did it out of compassion. He did it out of loving obedience to the Lord Jesus, who is Himself the paramount example of love and caring service to a neighbor in need.

The story of the Good Samaritan is, along with the Prodigal Son, probably the most well-known of all the parables of Jesus. The legacy of the Good Samaritan is an enduring one in our culture, even if many people have no idea that it comes from the Bible. Two years ago, for example, when my daughter Erin donated a kidney to her cousin Ben, the transplant surgeries took place at Good Samaritan Hospital in Phoenix.

Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan in response to a question from a religion scholar, an expert in the Jewish law and traditions. The conversation begins when the scholar asks Jesus a question that was often discussed and debated by Jews who were serious about their religion. It is the same question asked by the rich young man who, on another occasion, came running to Jesus, eager for some assurance that eternal life would be his inheritance (Matthew 19:16ff; Mark 10:17ff; and Luke 18:18ff). Since the scholar was an expert in the law, Jesus sent him back to the law – not because we are saved by the law, but because the law shows us our need to be saved. It shows us our need for grace – you know, the kind that is given free of charge to people who do not, will not, and cannot ever deserve it. Like me. And you. And the most respected religion scholar in the land. It shows us our inadequacy and our absolute dependence on God and His gracious favor.

The religion scholar gives Jesus a good answer – the answer Jesus Himself gave when asked to name the most important commandment of all, which is to love God above all else, with everything you are and everything you have, and then to love others as much as you love yourself (Matthew 22:36-37; Mark 12:30-31). Jesus tells the scholar he is on the right track, and says in verse 28: “Do this and you will live.” But we can’t “do this” on our own. We can’t love God and one another the way God wants, unless our hearts have first been gripped and changed by the love of God held out to us in the gospel. Life in the kingdom of God is not about keeping a set of rules. It is about living in the grace and love of God, by which we are forgiven and redeemed and changed and set free to love as God loves us, and to serve others in the name of Jesus.

The scholar knows it is easier said than done and, “looking for a loophole” (as W. C. Fields famously said when someone asked him one day why he was reading the Bible), the scholar asks Jesus to define “neighbor.” Warren Wiersbe makes the point that instead of *being justified* by throwing himself on the mercy of God, à la the tax-collector in Luke 18:9-14, the scholar was trying to *justify himself* and get himself off the hook by defining a whole class of potential neighbors out of existence. If certain people, or certain kinds of people, were not “neighbors” according to the letter of the law, then he did not have to show love to them. There may be times when we do exactly the same thing.

But Jesus doesn’t let him off the hook, does He? And He doesn’t let us off the hook either. Jesus does not answer the scholar’s question directly. He tells a story instead – the story of the Good Samaritan. You probably don’t need me to recount the story. (After all, we just read it a few minutes ago.)

What I will point out, just to be sure none of us misses it, is that in His telling of the story Jesus turns all the assumptions and expectations of the scholar and anyone else who happened to be listening, on their heads. The priest and the Levite were the good guys, weren’t they? If someone were in trouble or in need, they are the kind of people we could count on to step in and help, right? But they intentionally ignored the man by the side of the road who had been beaten to a pulp and robbed of everything he had, including his clothes. The priest and the Levite, both respected religious leaders, not only didn’t stop to help, they crossed to the other side of the road. They stayed as far away from this man in need as they could. Evidently, they were suffering from what a psychologist today has named EDD. Not ADD but EDD:

Empathy Deficit Disorder. They lacked the ability – or just the desire – to empathize with this needy man. They weren't able, or they weren't willing, to enter into the feelings, thoughts, or experience of this man who had been robbed and beaten. Maybe they were just too busy to be bothered. Maybe they were in a hurry to get somewhere. Maybe they thought they were too important to bother with something like this. Maybe they figured someone else would come along and take care of the guy. Maybe you and I would have done exactly what the priest and Levite did. Maybe we have. Lots of times.

Empathy Deficit Disorder is a serious condition. But it is curable. There is a cure. The cure is found in Jesus and His love. His sacrificial, saving love. His compassionate, caring love given *to* us and expressed *through* us.

In Jesus' story, of course, the hero is neither the priest nor the Levite. It is a Samaritan. Which would have shocked the religion scholar and all the rest of the Jews who heard of it. The idea of a "good Samaritan" was absurd. Preposterous. Outrageous. Unthinkable. A contradiction in terms.

Jews and Samaritans had lived with a deep hatred and hostility toward one another for more than 700 years. The Samaritans were a mixed race produced when the Jews in the region of Samaria intermarried with the Assyrians after the northern kingdom of Israel was overrun and defeated by the Assyrians way back in 722 BC. Jews looked down on Samaritans as half-breeds. They wouldn't even speak to one another – which is why the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 found it so astonishing that Jesus would speak to her. And the disciples of Jesus found it astonishing as well. To the Jews of Jesus' day, there was no such thing as a "good Samaritan." A Samaritan was the last person they would ever have expected to help this man in need.

Which brings us to the point of the parable, doesn't it? The religion scholar was asking the wrong question. The question is not so much: Who is my neighbor? The better question is: To whom can I be a neighbor? To whom can I be a good neighbor, like the Good Samaritan, or like Len Thomas?

Or this: How can I be a good neighbor to my neighbors? How can I be a good neighbor and help people in need around me, and even in places around the world? Simply put, in order to be a good neighbor, you must be willing to get involved. You must be willing to pitch in where you see a need and have the ability to help. To be a good neighbor in this sense is to be a good and faithful servant of Christ.

Some needs, like the needs of the man who had been beaten and robbed and left by the side of the road, are unanticipated. They are unexpected. Unpredictable. They may catch us off guard. Often they are inconvenient. That is how it is with ministry. That is how it is with helping people in need. That is how it is when you take the risk of getting involved.

It can be costly, too. Costly in terms of time, money, and energy. For the Good Samaritan, his act of mercy involved time, money, transportation, wine, oil, and cloth ripped from his own clothes. When he saw the man's condition, it says in *The Message*, (the Samaritan's)

heart went out to him. And what did he do? He gave him first aid, disinfecting and bandaging his wounds. Then he lifted him onto his donkey, led him to an inn, and made him comfortable. In the morning, he gave the innkeeper enough money to care for him for several days, and promised to come back and reimburse him for any additional expenses. He saw a need, and got involved.

Friends, there is no shortage of needs in this world. There is no shortage of needy people. There is no shortage of needs in the church. There is no shortage of ways you can serve as an act of love for God and love for one another. Look around you in the church. Look around you in this broken, fallen world. Find a need, and get involved, to do what you can as an act of love in the name of Jesus.

In Proverbs 31 it says to speak up for those who can't speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. There are people who are destitute. Even here in America there are people who are destitute. There are people who have no voice. There are people, there are girls, young women, who are enslaved today in different parts of the world, and some of them here in America. Hidden in the shadows.

Jesus would have us be a good neighbor. Jesus would have us speak up for those who can't speak for themselves, to defend those who cannot defend themselves. Jesus would ask us to take the risk of getting involved maybe in some things, some situations and problems that are really not very pleasant at all. But there is a need. And whether it is in the church or outside the organizational structure of the church in the world, in the name of Jesus, we are to get involved and do what we can to give what we can to help where we can, to let the light of the Lord Jesus Christ and His love shine into the dark places, to show His love, and be the instruments of His healing.

So friends, look around. Look around today. Find a need. Ask the Lord Jesus what He would have you do to get involved, to meet that need.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen