



CONGO INITIATIVE



What It Means To Be A Neighbor Luke 10:40-56

Prepare a worship/reflection space with visual reminders of health care. Perhaps you could spread a white cloth and put bandages or bandaids on it -- or a bottle of aspirin, surgical gloves, or real or toy medical instruments. You may want to print this picture or set up a picture, painting or sculpture that depicts or represents medical care.

Pray the following prayer or one of your own choosing.

*O God of Jesus Christ,
the great healer,
open our hearts
to your healing mission in the world.
Open our minds
that we may hear
the word you wish to speak to us
today.*

*Join our spirits
with your church in Congo
that together we may be neighbors
to those in need of care.
Amen.*



Read Luke 10:40-56

Discuss any or all of the following questions:

Luke says a lawyer stood up to “test” Jesus. What do you think that means? Is this a friendly cross-examination in the lawyer’s view?

Just before the lawyer starts asking questions, we’re told that seventy disciples Jesus sent out on a mission had just returned. What were they sent out to do?

Why might the mission of the seventy have prompted the lawyer to ask the question he finally asks Jesus?

Jesus asks the lawyer to answer his own initial question, which the lawyer does by quoting two scriptures, Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:8. The man then asks for clarification about the Leviticus passage. What exactly does he ask?

When the lawyer asks “who is my neighbor?” is he thinking of the “neighbor” as being on the giving end or the receiving end of the love?

In v 36, after he tells the story, Jesus asks the lawyer a question. Is the “neighbor” in Jesus’s question on the giving end or the receiving end of the love?

Is Jesus asking the same question the lawyer asked? What difference does that make?

Why do you think the priest and the levite cross to the other side of the road and keep going?

Why did the Samaritan stop and help?

Samaritans and Judeans had a serious political-theological dispute about where the temple should be. Samaritans thought it should be on Mt. Gerizim. Judeans thought it should be in Jerusalem. More than a century before Jesus was born, a Judean army invaded Samaria and destroyed the temple on Mt. Gerizim. Generally speaking, Samaritans and Judeans were theological and political enemies.

Where was the man who was robbed coming from? What, if anything, might that say about his religious and political identity?

Is it surprising that a priest and a levite would pass by the injured man and a Samaritan would stop and help? Explain.

What do you think about what the Samaritan did for the injured man?

Why do you think Jesus casts a Samaritan as the hero of this story?

What does this story say to us today?

What does this story mean for our relationship with our Christian partners in Congo? How might we be neighbors together to help the sick and care for the battered and bruised?

Being a neighbor

Our story today follows the first major missionary venture for Jesus’s disciples and, along with the story of Mary and Martha, introduces the Lord’s Prayer. So it sits in a very important place in the overall narrative of Luke. At the beginning of chapter 10, Jesus sends out seventy of his disciples to heal the sick, release those in the spiritual grip of “demonic” powers, and preach the good news that God’s reign is near. He sends them out “as lambs among wolves” (v 3), telling them to rely on the hospitality of anyone who offers it. They are amazed at the powerful results they experience as they step out in trust and risk everything for mission (v 17). Jesus responds with apocalyptic language that frames their mission as a sign of a larger, cosmic transformation: “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of



2008 first brick dedication ceremony for the project to rebuild the buildings destroyed by a 2006 electrical fire at Bolenge Hospital, a major regional medical center run by the Disciples community in Congo.

lightning!” (v 18). “Rejoice that your names are written in heaven!” (v 20; probably an allusion to an “end time” prophecy in Dan 12:1). The healing mission of the disciples is a sign: God is in the process of reworking the world, healing its brokenness, casting out the “demonic” powers that hold it in bondage. God’s reign is near!

But the rules and values of this new order fly in the face of the conventional wisdom.

Immediately following the return of the seventy, a lawyer stands up to “test” Jesus. “Rabbi, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (v 25). It’s kind of an odd way to phrase it -- inheritance isn’t usually something you “earn” by “doing.” It’s something you are graciously given because of who you are. Jesus turns the question back to the questioner: “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” The lawyer cites the second verse of the Shema from Deuteronomy 6 (“Hear, O Israel...”), perhaps the most important summary statement of Jewish faith: “You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your life, and with all your power!” (Deut 6:5). And he adds a phrase from Leviticus 19:18: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus, like many of the ancient rabbis, approves. But the lawyer goes further: “who is my neighbor?” he asks (v 29).

Jesus’s response shows that he understands the question behind the question: are we supposed to “love” those who are not part of our community?

The question is a bit more complicated than it first appears. Leviticus 19, which the lawyer is citing and questioning, contains a series of instructions on the proper treatment of “your neighbor” -- from not robbing him (v 13) to not endangering his life (v 16). Verse 18 is kind of a summary wrap-up: love your neighbor as you love yourself. What’s really interesting in this verse is its use of the word “love” (*’ahav*) to describe the proper relationship with your neighbor. The word reappears toward the end of chapter 19, in vv 33-34. Those verses talk about how to treat the *ger*, the “stranger,” the “resident alien,” the “sojourner,” the person who is not part of your community but who comes to live for a while in your neighborhood. “When an alien is temporarily residing with you in your land, don’t mistreat him. The alien will be like a native to you.... You will love (*’ahav*) him like one of your own because you were aliens in the land of Egypt. I am Yahweh!” Though “neighbor” in Leviticus 19 may well refer to someone in your community -- in this case, a fellow Judean -- you are also supposed to “love” people from other ethnic groups or religions or nationalities who reside temporarily in your area. Leviticus grounds this teaching in the foundational story of Israel, its liberation from slavery in Egypt. It’s sealed with God’s identity statement: “I am Yahweh!” In other words, “loving” the alien residing in your midst is not just something you do. It’s who you are. It’s who you are because it’s who God is.

Amy-Jill Levine, in her commentary on this passage in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*¹ points out another interesting feature of the word translated “neighbor” in the Leviticus verse. The spelling of this word (*resh ’ayin*) is the same as the spelling of the word for “evil” or “enemy.” Since the Hebrew Bible originally was written only with consonants, it’s only the oral tradition about how to pronounce the written text that lets us know for certain whether this word means “neighbor/friend” or “enemy.” Without the living spoken tradition, there is an intriguing ambiguity in the written text. When Jesus asks the lawyer, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” (Luke 10:26), Levine suggests, he may be asking if the lawyer sees the ambiguity of *resh ’ayin* and is able to interpret this core teaching of Jewish faith with the broad interpretation Jesus already offered a few chapters earlier, when he

¹ Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 2011)

urged his disciples to “love your enemies” (Luke 6:35) as well as your friends. Does this lawyer who wants to “earn” the “inheritance” of eternal life, who wants to know who exactly deserves his love, understand the full potential of the written text he so deftly cites?

Jesus then tells a story that twists the premise of the question and yields an amazing answer. A man is robbed and left for dead as he walks from Jerusalem to Jericho. A priest and, later, a levite -- probably his co-religionists -- come upon him and pass him on the other side of the road without stopping to help -- which, of course, they should have done, as Leviticus 19 and numerous other passages in the Torah and Prophets make clear. Then a Samaritan passes by and is moved with compassion toward the severely beaten man.



Progress on the rebuilding project at Bolenge Hospital as of May 2013.

Samaritans were Israelites from the north who disagreed with Judeans in the south about where the temple should be located. Judeans like the

priest, levite, and probably the man who was robbed thought temple worship should occur at Jerusalem. Samaritans thought it should happen in the north at Mt. Gerizim. More than a century before Jesus, the Maccabean high priest and political ruler of Jerusalem John Hyrcanus invaded Samaria, destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim, and enslaved a number of people there. Needless to say, Samaritans and Judeans were not friends and neighbors in the sense apparently intended by Leviticus 19. They were “enemies.” Though perhaps a political and theological “enemy” of the man who had been robbed “coming down from Jerusalem,” the Samaritan has compassion for him, picks him up, carries him to a place where he can get emergency care, and even arranges to pay the bill!

After he tells the story, Jesus reverses the lawyer’s question. “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (v 36). The question is not “who is my neighbor”? Who is worthy of my love? It’s not about their status. It’s about my compassion. What truly matters is my willingness to help those in need -- friend or enemy, native or alien. How will I be a neighbor? Not “who deserves my help?” Asked that way, the normal barriers of ethnicity, nationality, and religious belief vanish. Jesus “answers” the lawyer’s question by not answering it, by shifting the focus from “who’s my neighbor?” to “how do I love?” Playing by God’s rules means being a neighbor to those in need, whoever they may be. Playing by God’s rules means being true to myself as a redeemed child of God and true to my God who liberates slaves. Playing by God’s rules means being a neighbor, caring for the battered and bruised, the vulnerable and poor.

Being a neighbor in Congo

From the earliest days of the Community of Disciples of Christ in the Congo (CDCC) over a hundred years ago, Disciples in Congo have focused a significant portion of their work on the provision of

health care services. In 1928, they built a hospital in Bolenge, literally on the equator, where the Northern Hemisphere and the Southern Hemisphere meet. Today, the Bolenge Hospital is the most important health center in the Equatorial Province, serving people from all over that part of western Congo. Congolese staff provide health care for more than 16,000 people every year. The numbers have grown in recent years in the aftermath of the war.

The lingering effects of the war have stretched hospital services to the limit. The increased need for community health care and for essential medications have put an enormous strain on hospital resources. An electrical fire in 2006 completely destroyed part of the hospital. Fortunately, all the patients were evacuated and no one died in the blaze. A project to rebuild the destroyed building and modernize the other buildings has begun. In the summer of 2008, Disciples General Minister and President Sharon Watkins, Global Ministries Africa Executive Sandra Gourdet, and a delegation of Indiana Disciples participated in the laying of the first stone for the new hospital buildings. Their pledge that Disciples in the US and Canada through Global Ministries would work with the Disciples community in Congo to help rebuild the hospital encouraged USAID and other international aid agencies and NGOs to contribute funds as well. The project is well underway, with new pediatrics and maternity wards already built.

A few years ago, Dr. Gene Johnson traveled to Congo to assess the infrastructure of all six Disciples hospitals -- Bolenge, Bosobele, Lotumbe, Wema, Monieka, and Mondombe. With help from a number of international partners, including Global Ministries, the Disciples community in Congo began to address deficiencies and modernize equipment and facilities. Unfortunately, with the exception of Bolenge, the hospitals continue to suffer from deteriorating facilities and inadequate and outdated equipment. Doctors frequently must work without electricity. Some have no ability to refrigerate vaccines and blood. Some suffered damage during the war as militias and armies moved through.

Medical equipment needs to be modernized and basic infrastructure such as beds, cabinets, doors, tile, and paint are required. The Disciples community is also focused on improving sanitation and water supplies, drilling wells and adding rain collection systems to provide an adequate supply of safe water. They also hope to add solar energy equipment to generate electricity.

Transportation continues to be an issue for nurses and health care workers who travel throughout the region to bring vaccines and medications from the hospitals to homes and villages and to visit the sick. To address this need, the Disciples community is seeking funds to buy six more motorcycles and 300 bicycles for use by nurses and pastors. They've already been able to purchase motorcycles for doctors at most of the hospitals. Bicycles and motorcycles are the most useful means of transportation through



Congolese pastor in Mbandaka on a motorcycle bought with support from Global Ministries

much of the countryside, where roads are virtually non-existent. Those that do exist are typically very rough and in serious disrepair.

To read more about equipment and facility needs, visit the Global Ministries website or click [here](#) and [here](#). To read more about the motorcycles and bicycles project, click [here](#). To give to one or more of these projects or to donate to any Global Ministries project around the world, click [here](#).

Conclude with the following prayer or a prayer of your own choosing:

*Merciful God,
you rescued us from enslavement,
you found us lifeless
on the side of the road.
You gently cleaned and bandaged our wounds.
You carried us to healing safety.
O God who liberates slaves,
who heals the battered and brokenhearted,
teach us to love,
to heal,
to cast out demonic powers
that bind the spirit,
to be a neighbor,
as you have loved
and been a neighbor to us.
We pray for your healing work among us,
in our neighborhood and nation,
and we pray for your healing work in Congo.
Give us hearts for mission,
filled with love and compassion
as your heart is filled
for our broken world.
In the name of Jesus,
the great healer,
who loves us,
Amen.*

For the complete bible study series please visit
www.globalministries.org/congo-initiative/biblestudies.html.