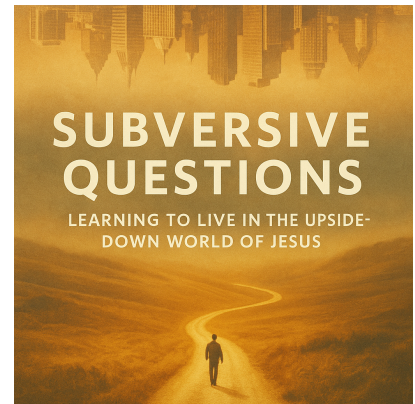


July 13, 2025
Rev. Mike Eller

Subversive Questions: The Upside-Down Way of Jesus

“Will You Be a Neighbor?”

Luke 10:25-37



I consider myself to be a clean person. Most mornings, I shower, shave, brush my teeth. (*Yes, this was one of those mornings!*) I keep a travel-sized toothpaste and toothbrush in my church office “just in case.” I try to get regular haircuts—just got a fresh one yesterday!—always concerned that I would come across as unkempt, even to strangers. When I get dressed, I put on a strong deodorant and then a last layer of cologne in my fear that I would smell bad to someone. I do this instinctively, even when working from home. My dog, Tilly, at least appreciates it. I keep floss picks in multiple places: at the house, in the office, in my backpack, sometimes in the pockets of my pants (ask my wife who does the laundry and often finds that I forgot to throw one away). The thought of something in my teeth disgusts me, and that it would be noticed by someone else disgusts me even more.

When I eat a meal, having a napkin or three nearby is just as important as the meal itself. Food that might be so pleasing when eaten is somehow revolting when it misses the mouth or gets on our clothes. I try to chew with my mouth closed and probably avoid eye contact with those who don’t return the favor. I apologize for the image, but I wouldn’t dare spit something out of my mouth if someone could possibly see it happen. Even if its something tasty when kept in somehow turns disgusting when it leaves. I don’t often think of it consciously, but the idea of disgust regulates most of my daily routines, and yours as well, whether or not you know it.

Richard Beck, in his book *Unclean*, frames the psychology of our experience of disgust biologically, socially, morally, and religiously. In it, he quotes author William Miller who said, “Humans are most likely the only species that experiences disgust, and we seem to be the only one capable of loathing its own species.”

This tells me, that 1) It's not all our fault... there is something inherent in our biology that triggers this disgust impulse, AND maybe I'm not just an anal retentive, self-conscious person; and 2) This means that the potential to do social, emotional, even physical harm to our own human family, because of disgust, is real. This should concern us. This universal impulse, Beck points out, is underscored by the fact that all humans show disgust on their faces the same way: the wrinkling of the nose, the raising of the upper lip, the particular movement of the eyes. Some of you practice this during my sermons, so I know it's true.

What I've learned—and *am in the process of learning*—is how we make the distinction between what is clean vs. what is unclean, either doing this consciously or unconsciously, is another powerful tool the mind uses to *other* people. When I say *other* people, I mean putting them into categories that create distance or even minimize their humanity. This is a subconscious process that sends signals as to whether or not we should engage them at all. Whether or not I choose to see it, my efforts to be "clean" sets me against everything I, even unconsciously, determine to be unclean. Again, this shows itself at the levels of our biology, our socio-moral convictions, and even our religious beliefs and practices.

Now, I don't intend to let myself go in order to minimize the risk but it is important to know that with the rigidity of our practices and disciplines, we might have some psychological ground to make up if we are to be a person who is available to others, especially the more vulnerable or those with any degree of difference from us. Left unchecked, our resistance to what we determine is unclean, will rule our actions and construct our worldview.

Now, I want to bring all of this to today's parable on the Good Samaritan. This is Jesus' most famous parable—His bestseller. It is so ubiquitous that even the unchurched will call on its morality when encountering others in need. Being a *Good Samaritan* is a household term. Familiarity though breeds contempt. So we cannot be too simplistic about what's being asked here. This is not as simple as "be nice like the Samaritan and not mean like the priest!" That's usually how the sermon will go. I'll quickly summarize it for us: Who is my neighbor? It's everyone. It's those closest to you but also those far away. It's those you're comfortable with and even your enemies. Done. Send around the offering plate and let's all go home.

Yet, I don't believe the lawyer's question—"Who is my neighbor?"—is where the greatest challenge lies. Even the lawyer gets that right. When Jesus

poses the question *back to him*, after telling the parable, the lawyer responds, “the one who showed kindness.” Jesus said, “Go and do likewise.” That’s the real challenge: The going, the doing likewise. Theologian Franz Leenhardt said: “One cannot define one’s neighbor; one can only *be* a neighbor.”

The parable was given as an answer to the lawyer’s initial question: “How do I inherit eternal life?” So that when we put it all together, showing kindness to the other is how we “Love our God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind.” The lawyer surely struggled to process this: “So, the way to *my* eternal life is helping someone else *have more and better life*?” “The way that *I* show love *my* God is to love and heal the other?” I’m sure he expected something that sounded more like personal spirituality, something that takes place in a prayer closet...during devotional time or worship, something more prosperity-gospel-sounding. And yet, according to Jesus, our salvation is bound up together. The past couple of weeks, we talked about this in terms of mutual flourishing, which moves us beyond mere acts of service and into the ballroom of mutuality.

What does it take to “go and do likewise”? This is not so simple—especially when we consider all the psychological barriers that seize us and keep us from seizing upon our own Samaritan moments... what theologian Miroslav Wolf calls, “the will to embrace.”

I had a wonderful chat a couple of weeks ago with Wanangwa Nyirongo, who is home this Summer from college! Wanangwa is studying psychology at Virginia Tech University—in my home state—and will be starting his last semester this Fall. He’s also someone who has shown some eagerness to learn the Bible and possibly pursue some theological training at some point. I thought of our chat in the context of this parable and I invited him to help me in this sermon name those psychological barriers that keep us from engaging the other. So, I’d like to bring him up to discuss this a bit more. Would you help me welcome Wanangwa?

Q&A with Wanangwa

From your perspective in studying psychology, what are some of the internal barriers that make it hard for people to respond to strangers, those in need, or even to engage the other at all?

What do you feel are some modern-day examples of how these inner psychological systems keep us from “walking to the other side of the road”?

What can we do to minimize the power of these inner barriers or altogether re-train our brains, so that we are more available to respond to others?

(Q&A concludes)

If I can make a pitch for why we show up in this space week to week: Part of it is this need to re-train and recalibrate. Often we might just think we're a bad Christian or don't want to do "good". Paul wrestles with it this way in the book of Romans (7:15-19):

"I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me... For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing."

What makes this Samaritan "good"? Was it how he tended to the wounds of the man? Was it all that he sacrificed to give him the ongoing care he needed to completely heal? That is certainly part of it. But none of that happens without coming near, without crossing the road in the first place. Without transcending his tendency to distance himself, like the others did.

Proximity precedes the action to heal. Perhaps eternal life emerges in this act of drawing near and refusing distance. My hope is that in naming it this morning we are on the way to retraining our systems and realigning ourselves with Christlikeness. To be sure, though, just naming it is only the beginning. Doing the work will help us also transcend it. In Paul's words, overcoming this tendency of sin.

To close, I want to return to the lawyer's question: "Who is my neighbor?" Mr. Rodgers, in nearly 900 episodes over 33 years of his TV neighborhood, asked a better question: "*Won't* you be my neighbor? He famously sings at the start of every show: "I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you; I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you; Won't you please...please won't you be my neighbor?"

Mr. Rodgers was more interested in *being* a neighbor than simply knowing who makes the list. One particular episode stands out: At the height of the racial tensions in America in 1969—specifically in the hot Summer, which saw segregation at the swimming pools—Mr. Rodgers invited a regular on the show and close friend, Officer Clemmons—a black man—to put his feet in a small swimming pool with him on set.

A simple act. A move to come near—one filled with defiance and solidarity, yet with no small amount of risk of ridicule. All those children who watched his show growing up saw modeled not just talked about, what it looks like to be a neighbor, no matter the cost. This, to me, is a Jesus-move, a Samaritan-like move. Before we're concerned with how it might look... Before we're paralyzed by the uncleanliness of the person or situation... The Jesus way is in the crossing over, in the coming near. That just could be the beginning of healing.

Go

and

do

likewise.