

## OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON

September 12, 2019

**Neighbor**, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor, senior minister, based on Luke 10. 25-37 and preached on the occasion of the launch of the Snowden-Old South Urban Partnership

I see you. I see you. When I look out upon this congregation I see beauty and courage. I see goodness and pain. I see you.

When I look out upon this congregation I see diagnoses: gut-punch, mortality summoning diagnoses. I see old age having its way. I see infants brand new to this world and more joy in their parents' hearts—and in their grandparents hearts – than water in the ocean. I see you.

I see amazing people, gifted people who have been let go of jobs, or who haven't been able to find the work you know you can do. I see you.

I see widows and widowers, with large holes in your hearts, yet soldiering on. I see persons who have triumphed over addiction, and for whom each day sober is victory. And I see ones still in thrall to substances that alter both mind and body. I see you.

I see survivors battling demons and the terrors of the night. I see students amassing debt, even as you acquire knowledge; and anxious over what jobs might, or might not be there when you graduate. Anxious too, about your love-life; or your not-yet-love-life. I see you.

I see you grappling with social media, and undone by a 24-hour news cycle with cameras focused in on the worst of human behaviors – not on the best of human behaviors – cameras trained on human hatred and violence, on despair and on human tragedy; so much human tragedy; so overwhelming, you're not sure you can't bear it any longer. I see you.

I see you writing obituaries for your own parents, and laying them to rest, and sorting through the material stuff they left behind (photos & furniture). And you, hesitantly, stepping up and in to take their place as elders—wondering, *When did this happen?* I see you.

I see you, here now, in this house, at worship, in God's house, exceedingly, earnestly attentive to an ancient ethic calling us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. An ancient ethic captured in a story Jesus tells, the story, the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

It goes like this. A traveler is attacked, beaten, robbed and left in a ditch to die. By chance a priest happens by, sees the man bleeding in the ditch and walks by without helping.

A Deacon traveling that same road happens by the same spot, sees the same man bleeding in the same ditch, and he too, passes by without pausing to help.

Finally, a third man, a Samaritan (everybody hates the Samaritans) is traveling that same road. Upon seeing the man in the ditch the Samaritan stops to help the man. He stoops, down, binds the man's wounds, helps him up, seats him on his donkey, takes him to the nearest inn, and pays the inn keeper for the man's food and board.

The story teaches that we should do what the Samaritan did.

This story is often considered the heart and soul of Christianity, more so than any doctrine or belief. The story suggests that to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus, is to show kindness. That's it. That's the summary, the nutshell version. When all is said and done the Christian life is a life of kindness.

But, frankly, that's a tall order. The world has changed. If you happen upon a guy bleeding and robbed, you'll call 9-1-1, but you're not going to put a perfect stranger in your car, or on your bicycle, or on your back. You could get robbed. The victim who is bleeding might have AIDS and who of us carries rubber gloves? Or, the guy you're trying to help could sue you for invading his space!

This isn't the first century. We have 9-1-1 and first responders, and we have litigation. And yet, here you are, in God's house, exceedingly, earnestly attentive to this ancient ethic. I see you. I see you aching to fix this bleeding and bruised world; longing to bind up wounds, to help and heal, to soothe and comfort, to make it better and fairer. I see you yearning to show some compassion, some human kindness. I see that about you. I love that about you.

Here is what I know. (Oh, and please don't tell Jesus what I'm about to say.) You can't be the Good Samaritan to every person in every ditch. You can't. The world has changed. The needs are prodigious. The needs are overwhelming. But the world isn't safe.

However, together, as a church, we are mightier than the sum of our parts. Together, as a church, we support victims of hurricane and flood, earthquake and fire, famine and warfare through emergency grants, and with our partners on the ground, in places of dire need. As a church, as a member church of the UCC, we have partners on the ground, across the world.

You can't take in every unhoused person on the streets of Boston. You can't. But, together, we founded and support Boston Warm, a day shelter for the unhoused. Boston Warm is so much more than a place to rest, a place with bathrooms. It is food and drink. It is companionship and such services as barbers and hair stylists, nurses and case workers. But it is more even than these simple necessities. Boston Warm is unconditional love. It is the showing of kindness.

You can't take in every single mother who is in danger of sliding into poverty and homelessness, but together, as Old South Church, we support City Missions' A Lift Up. A Lift Up is an intensive, voluntary two-year homelessness prevention program for low-income single mothers and their families who are at risk of losing their housing.

Several times of year, in our Chapel – to much hoopla, to cake and ice cream, balloons and bouquets, laughter and applause – some twelve to twenty local mothers receive certificates and graduate from the program. You can't, on your own, provide an elegant old Chapel for these graduations, or an annual grant of \$25,000. You can't. But as a church we can. We do.

You can't on your own, protect immigrants under immediate deportation orders. But as Old South Church, working with partner congregations, we are doing just that.

In this, our 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, we are stepping up our response to the command to love our neighbor. Please take a look at the white insert. Ask yourself: How can I join forces with this church to be the neighbor God is calling me to be?

This weekend we launch a new partnership with Snowden International High School, our near neighbor with whom we share this block. We are stepping up our neighborliness to this public school serving over 500 high schoolers. Maybe you can help.

You can help us name, face, and overcome the sin of racism, learning to be neighbor to persons whose skin color is different from yours.

You can help Build-a-Bed for a local child in poverty.

You can participate in our Family Soup Kitchen by preparing meals here in our kitchen and then taking them out to the streets to deliver them in person to unhoused neighbors.

You can show kindness to God's imperiled creation by participating in the Global Climate Strike.

I see you. I see you. When I look out on this people I see beauty and courage, goodness and pain. And this: I see you aching to ease human suffering, longing to bind up wounds, yearning to give shelter to the refugee. Yet, I see you feeling overwhelmed and discouraged at the extent of human misery.

But here's the thing. You can't do it on your own. You can't. Don't even try. You'll make yourself miserable and you will fail at other things: like caring for your family and friends and yourself.

But together – forces joined, arms linked, prayers ascending, money pooled, volunteers signed up, sleeves rolled up, hearts breaking, tears welling, defeating despair, defiantly hopeful – together we can and we do heal and sooth, companion and champion. Together – not any of us on our own – as a church, as Christ's body, we live out the high ethic to which Jesus calls us. Together we give witness to an ethic of kindness, a morality at whose heart and center is compassion.

God isn't asking us to save the world. God's got that.

All God asks of us is open hearts, a little human kindness, and evidence of compassion.

I see you. You've got that. You've got that in spades.