

Loving Our Neighbors

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In the 1970s my father arrived on BYU campus to begin his studies. He was not the average BYU student, especially during that time period. My father had come to BYU from Venezuela, a country that many students at BYU had never even heard of at the time. He spoke virtually no English, and he was Catholic.

The way my father likes to tell the story, he boarded a plane to the United States, excited to venture outside of his conservative Catholic upbringing and expecting the secular American college experience he had seen in Hollywood movies. Imagine his shock when he discovered that his parents, my *abuela* and *abuelo*, had arranged for him to attend BYU so that a group of people known to him only as “the Mormons” could keep an eye on him while he was far from home.

My dad found himself in a strange place surrounded by people who were very different from him. He found the sights and smells of his tropical Caribbean home—mango trees, macaws, coffee, and the ocean—replaced by those of BYU. He was struck by the flowerbeds on campus, which changed with the seasons; the empty streets and closed storefronts every Sunday; and the snow. But the students and faculty of BYU welcomed him into the community with open arms. Professors invited my father to share his perspective and experiences in class; roommates and friends took my father skiing and on road trips

to see the United States. A professor invited my father to live with his family for several months while my father adjusted to life here.

My father could have chosen to transfer to a different institution, but he returned to BYU every fall from Venezuela. He learned English here, and then he graduated with a bachelor’s degree. It has been almost forty years since my father was a student at BYU, but he remembers his time here very fondly. In fact, while I was growing up in Venezuela, my father could spot missionaries of the Church from a mile away. Even though he was not a Latter-day Saint, he would look for them and talk to them, often asking if they were BYU students.

I am grateful to the BYU community for being so welcoming to someone with life experiences so unlike the majority’s; for being willing to listen to and learn from someone with a different culture, language, and religion; and for making room in their individual lives for someone who might have seemed like an outsider.

I too have been the beneficiary of others’ efforts to reach out to people from different walks of life. My early childhood was spent in and around the

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city of Maracaibo in Venezuela. My mother, a U.S. citizen whom my father had met here at BYU, was a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and took me to church with her on Sundays. During the week, though, I attended a Catholic school for girls.

At the beginning of my first year at Colegio Altamira, one of the nuns at my school—I wish I remembered her name—tapped me on the shoulder and asked if she could talk to me. She led me to a hallway outside my classroom, where we sat on a bench.

I was sure I was in big trouble. But I wasn't. This sister told me she just wanted to know more about how I prayed. She knew I was not Catholic, and she had noticed that I did not recite the prayers that the rest of the class recited every morning. I told her about how my mother had taught me to pray. This nun and I discussed the differences and the similarities in our styles of prayer. I awkwardly apologized for not knowing the prayers that the other girls were reciting, and I vividly remember this sister telling me that she thought my way of praying was beautiful.

That experience has stayed with me. A woman who had committed her whole life to serving God through the Catholic Church—and who served as an authority figure in her church—sat down with a little girl of another faith to have a genuine conversation about prayer, not to convert or change her but to connect with her as sisters and daughters of the same God.

The Good Samaritan

I offer these stories today as examples of communities and individuals striving to follow Jesus's plea that we love our neighbor as ourselves.¹

Unfortunately, I think our understanding of the term *neighbor* may be blemished by the modern urban and suburban reality of homogenous and socially segregated neighborhoods. I fear that when we hear the word *neighbor*, we imagine people who live near us, likely in houses or apartments that look a lot like our own and whom we chat with at the neighborhood park or in the stairway that connects our apartments. We envision

people who lead lives similar to ours, who speak the same language we do, and who have similar beliefs, goals, and challenges. We love them abstractly without really knowing them because we assume we understand them—they are, after all, a lot like we are. But this is most certainly not what Jesus meant when He instructed us, “Love thy neighbour as thyself.”²

When a lawyer asked the Savior to define the term *neighbor*, Jesus answered by telling the parable of the good Samaritan.³ As you will remember, a man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho and was brutally robbed and left for dead. A priest and a Levite each passed by without offering help. A Samaritan, however, stopped to treat the man's wounds, took him to a safe place to stay the night, and left money with the innkeeper for the injured man's care. Jesus urged, “Go, and do thou likewise.”⁴

The literature commenting on and analyzing this parable is rich with layers of cultural context and doctrinal insights. But today I want to focus on three very basic pieces of the story that help me better love my neighbor.

1. Loving More Personally and Concretely

An element of the parable of the good Samaritan that has been meaningful to me is the *way* in which the Samaritan served the injured man: he physically rescued him. We read in Luke that he “bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.”⁵ The Samaritan then stayed the night in the inn before leaving money for the injured man's care and promising to repay any additional expenses required. The Samaritan made space in his life, both physically and mentally, for the injured man and got close to him. This was not abstract compassion. It was concrete. This was not arm's-length love. This was an embrace.

The Savior asks us to go and do likewise.

Loving our neighbor requires getting close to our neighbor and giving of ourselves. In Spanish, the term for “love of neighbor” is *amor al prójimo*, or “love of the one who is in proximity.” The term

prójimo connotes a physical closeness and personal touch that *neighbor* simply fails to capture for me. We follow the good Samaritan's example not by abstractly loving from afar but by truly connecting and spending time with each other, by genuinely giving of ourselves. This is not always easy: getting close often involves sacrifice and discomfort. It can be awkward, time consuming, and emotionally draining. Surely the Samaritan had other plans for his day, but he stopped to love someone who needed him.

I have never regretted getting close to someone to more genuinely serve him or her. I do, however, regret the times I have failed to do so. Many years ago I was practicing law at a firm in Salt Lake City. Every morning I would drive to the light-rail station near my house, park my car, and take the train into downtown Salt Lake. One morning I was running very late. I parked my car just as a train pulled into the station, and I rushed toward it. Ordinarily I had more time to evaluate the cars and select the car that appeared to have the most open seating. This time, though, I rushed onto the closest car. To my surprise and delight, I found the car completely empty. But as soon as I sat down, I understood why.

An elderly man in worn and heavily soiled clothes sat slumped and crumpled on the floor at the opposite end of the car. His fingernails were long and jagged, his hair was dirty, and it was clear from the smell in the car that he had not bathed in some time. My heart ached for him. Some part of me wanted to help him, but I didn't know how. I worried about embarrassing him or embarrassing myself by trying to help. I worried about being late for work and about getting my clothes dirty.

I wavered too long. A couple of stations down the track, a man, dressed as if he too had a job downtown, entered the car near where the old man sat. Instead of turning around and finding a different car, as many others had done, he reached down, pulled the man up toward him, wrapped his arms around him, and gently helped him off the train.

I don't know what happened after that. But the rescuer did not get back on the train. He likely

didn't make it to work that morning. He probably got his clothes dirty. He got physically close and gave of himself. I wish I had had the courage to do that. But I am also grateful for that lesson. I am working on better recognizing and seizing opportunities to love my neighbor—*el prójimo*.

In the summer of 2016 I traveled for the first time to Dilley, Texas. You probably have never heard of Dilley. It is a small town with fewer than 4,000 residents about ninety miles away from the border with Mexico. Dilley is home to one of the largest immigration detention centers in the country. Reserved exclusively for women and children, the South Texas Family Residential Center, as it is called, can house more than 2,000 women and children behind its tall barbed-wire fences. Most of the women and children there have traveled to the United States fleeing violence in Central America and hoping to apply for asylum. Multinational gangs have been terrorizing communities in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala for several years. In the months leading up to my trip to Dilley, I had read stories in the newspapers of sexual violence, murder, kidnapping, extortion, and torture.

I had been thinking, quite abstractly, about doing something to help these detained women and children for more than a year, but I was unsure of whether I was qualified to help, hesitant to travel so far from my home and family, and nervous about the emotional burden of listening to women tell stories of violence. In many ways I was paralyzed like I had been on the train to Salt Lake. I am grateful to a colleague and friend at the Law School, Professor Kif Augustine-Adams, who nudged me toward this opportunity to give of myself in a personal rather than an abstract way. She arranged for us to spend a week in Dilley helping the women and children there begin the first steps toward claiming asylum in the United States.

That week changed my life. In Dilley I met women who had endured unspeakable horrors in their home countries and who had left everything they knew to find safety for their families. Many of them had walked most of the way from Central America to the United States, often carrying

infants. While we were at the detention center, my colleague and I met individually with women in visitation rooms. We listened to their stories and helped them prepare to tell those stories to an asylum officer.

I remember speaking to one woman whose husband had been killed by a gang. She struggled through her sobs to tell her story while her son slept in her arms. In that moment I loved that woman—my sister—personally. Her proximity to me helped me better understand her humanity and mine. And, suddenly, it was not just “okay” to be more than a thousand miles away from my comfortable home in Provo, spending a long and hot July day in an immigration detention center; it was exactly where I wanted to be.

Later my colleague and I began taking students to volunteer in Dilley. Luisa Patoni-Rees, a recent graduate of the BYU Law School who volunteered in Dilley, described her experience of loving more concretely and personally:

I learned that loving requires sacrifice, inconvenience, and physical and emotional pain. . . . I learned that I did not love my neighbors in Dilley until I was actually there, no matter how much I thought and cared about them from afar.

2. Loving Those Who Are Different

A second component of the story of the good Samaritan that is meaningful to me is the identity of the hero in the story—the Samaritan. Though Samaritans shared much of their ancestry with the Jewish people, they differed in their religious practices. Both groups regarded each other with suspicion and antagonism. The animosity was such that Jews traveled out of their way to go around Samaria on journeys that would have been much more direct by crossing through Samaria.

Though Jesus didn’t identify the injured man in the parable, we know Jesus was telling this story in response to a question from a Pharisee, a Jewish lawyer. This lawyer would likely have imagined a Jewish man as the injured character, especially since the injured man was traveling on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The setup of the story

suggests that the Samaritan stopped to help someone very different from himself. In fact, the Samaritan rescued someone who might not have done the same if the tables had been turned.

The Savior asks us to go and do likewise.

Our neighbors are not the people who are most like us; rather, our neighbors are those who are different from us. They are the people whom our own social circles have rejected. They are our brothers and sisters who worship differently than we do, who come from different backgrounds, who look different from us, who make different choices than we do, who have dreams and goals that differ from ours, who disagree with us, or who have despised us. This, of course, is not to say that the people who are most like us aren’t our neighbors. But our love for others cannot be conditioned on their similarities to us. We must love others understanding that they are individuals separate and distinct from us. The differences that separate us in this life make us each other’s neighbors, and, just as the Samaritan did, we must reach out to love and serve those who are different.

This can be extremely difficult. Much of our life is devoted to surrounding ourselves with people who are like us. We become friends with people who share common interests. We attend church each week in part to join with a community of people who have beliefs similar to ours. We even curate our social media feeds to feature individuals who think like we do and block or unfollow people whose opinions bother or offend us. This is a natural human inclination. We want to feel that we belong, that we are respected and understood, and that we are loved for who we are.

But what might it be like to be an outsider—unwanted and uninvited? On my most recent trip to Dilley, I met a woman who understood from her interactions with immigration officials on the border and from what she had seen on the news that she was an outsider. When I met with her to prepare her for her interview with an asylum officer, she told me that she knew she was unwanted in this country. She admitted, “I don’t want to be here either.” She told me about the friends and

family she had left behind—including her mother, who was too old to travel—and her job as a school teacher. After escaping abduction and rape by a gang in Honduras, she had come to the United States to move in with an extended family member living here. She spoke no English and knew very little about the United States, but she had nowhere else to go. I was touched by the way in which the women at the detention center physically reached out to comfort and help each other, even when the only thing they had in common was their shared status as outsiders.

Rest assured that you do not need to travel to the border to interact with people who are different from you. There are other kinds of borders that divide us in our neighborhoods, in our cities, in our wards, and here on campus. It is our responsibility to do what BYU students and faculty members did for my father and what a nun at my school did for me. We must find our brothers and sisters who feel marginalized and out of place. They are not far. They sit next to us in class, stand behind us in line at the grocery store, and eat at our Thanksgiving table.

Sometimes we fail to see our brothers and sisters who most need our outreach because we can't see past our own experiences. Our mistake may be to assume that everyone around us has reached the same conclusions and developed the same perspectives that we have. We must be prepared to accept that others' experiences have been different from our own and that those experiences might lead to different conclusions, opinions, and ways of living. Otherwise we risk further marginalizing and isolating the very neighbors the Savior has asked us to love. There is nothing lonelier than feeling like nobody really knows or understands you and fearing that if others truly did see you as you are, they might not accept you.

I have been touched and inspired by countless examples of BYU students right here on campus crossing the subtle borders that separate us. They have opened their circles to include someone with a different story, a different background, or another perspective. Over the years I have watched my students babysit the children of a fellow student,

who was a single parent, while she studied; befriend, love, and rally around a classmate who was gay; carry books and open doors for a fellow student with a disability; comfort an undocumented immigrant student whose status and future in the country was uncertain; invite to their study group an older student who had returned to school after more than a decade in another career; and graciously sit next to a student whose in-class comments had seemed harsh and unwarranted.

A small effort to connect with someone may mean the difference between despair and hope for that person. And we, in turn, may find our life enriched by that connection.

3. Learning from Those Who Are Different

This brings me to a third lesson that I have learned from the parable of the good Samaritan. I think it is significant that, in this story, Jesus chose a despised outsider—a Samaritan—as the benevolent savior rather than the victim. It may be a Samaritan—an outsider we least expect to have compassion for us—who rescues us. We must reach out to those who are different, not only because they may need us but because we need them. Are we humble enough to recognize that the Samaritans in our lives have something to offer us? Can we do as Jesus did when He chose to pass through Samaria on His way to Galilee rather than avoid a group of people who were not welcome at home? Will we acknowledge the woman at the well—a Samaritan—and accept a drink of water from her?⁶

A recent experience cemented this lesson for me. A few weeks ago my family and I visited Encircle, a resource center for LGBTQ youth and their families right here in Provo. The resource center is housed in a beautifully restored home that was built in 1891. Encircle provides programming and services—including counseling, social activities, service opportunities, and more—for the LGBTQ community. I had been thinking—once again, quite abstractly—for some time about how I might be more helpful and supportive of our local LGBTQ community, but I had been unsure of what I could do.

My family parked our car outside of Encircle, and we walked in the side door of the blue-and-white building. I was ready to offer myself to Encircle. Maybe I could volunteer there, or perhaps I could donate funds for programming, or maybe I could offer some kind of pro bono legal help. I was proud of myself for finally making a real effort to act.

What I hadn't really stopped to consider was that my brothers and sisters in the LGBTQ community might have something to offer *me*—that I might need them. As soon as my family walked in the door, we were welcomed, quite literally, with open arms. My children found other children to play with, and new friends offered us food and let us into their lives. I was struck by the sense of community and closeness I felt there and by how quickly this new circle of friends had opened up to us. I left Encircle that day not as the rescuer I had imagined myself to be but as the rescued.

I also learned this same lesson when I traveled to Dilley for the first time. In that summer of 2016 I boarded a plane to Texas with every intention of helping—even rescuing—the women and children detained there. But I did not expect to learn so much about the human spirit, about resiliency and courage, from my interactions with these women. I expected to find broken spirits and desperate souls. Instead I often encountered grace and an unyielding faith that inspired me. The course of my life has changed because of my interactions with these women, and I am grateful to them for that.

The students who have volunteered in Dilley have learned similar lessons. Eli Pratt, a former student of mine, remembers learning this lesson too. He told me about a woman he had met in Dilley. This woman had endured sexual violence, gang violence, and abandonment at every juncture in her life. It wasn't until gang members threatened her young son that she left her country. Eli said:

She was shattered in many ways. She had every reason to give up. But there she was, pressing forward, doing the best she could for herself and her child. . . . She taught me that people have an extraordinary capacity to overcome challenges, more than we would like to discover.

Lauren Simpson, another former student, had a similar experience. She described her realization that the women of Dilley could be examples to her:

Here were these women, often several years younger than I was, bringing up children with so much grit and grace in the midst of danger and violence. They had both a strength and a sorrow that I could not touch. It was humbling to witness, and it made me realize that their life experiences had given them a knowledge I did not possess. It made me feel like . . . there were things they could teach me through their examples.

Go and Do Likewise

I suppose I should not have been surprised that connecting with those who are different from me would enrich my life and shape it for the better. This is, after all, my origin story. I am a child of two different cultures, two languages, and two continents. I have always found good Samaritans on each side of every kind of border I have crossed. They have been neighbors to me, not as a result of our paths coincidentally crossing but as a result of their going out of their way to reach out to me. They have come close to me despite the differences that have separated us, they have given of themselves to help me, and they have allowed me to offer them a part of myself.

This past year my two younger sisters and I traveled to Venezuela to be with our father while he had surgery there. Fortunately his surgery went well. We found ourselves together on a plane crossing the Caribbean on the way to Venezuela, just as we had done countless times during our childhood, but this time we were unsure of what we might find in Venezuela. I had not been to Venezuela for ten years. Venezuela is in the midst of an economic collapse that has resulted in the highest inflation rate in the world, shortages of food and medicine, and a mass migration out of the country. Venezuelans have settled in the United States, Colombia, Panamá, Chile, Spain, and many other corners of the world.

It was surreal to find the country of my childhood in a state of disrepair and decay and to think of the hundreds of thousands of

Venezuelans who had no choice but to leave everything behind.⁷ I thought about my own friends and family members who are starting over somewhere new. I hope they have the same luck my father had when he came to BYU. I hope they find good Samaritans wherever they end up and that they, in turn, are good Samaritans in their new countries. I hope they encounter fellow travelers in this life who understand that we are here to love each other.

Though it sometimes feels complicated in practice, the concept of loving our neighbor is very simple. My son instinctively understood this principle and taught it to me when he was only five years old. One evening my husband and I had buckled our two oldest children into their car seats to run some errands. We had just purchased a minivan. This purchase was the final frontier in our acquiescence to suburban parenthood. We had hoped that a minivan would put some distance between the two very loud children in the back and us—two exhausted parents—when we were in the car. Those of you with children will empathize with the desire for a little peace and quiet while driving.

The kids were complaining about something nobody remembers now. In desperation, my husband turned toward the back and pleaded,

“Can we please just have some peace and quiet? Just for a moment?”

My then five-year-old son, Alex, looked at us, earnestly puzzled by what he perceived as a harsh request. His eyes teared up, and he exclaimed, “But, Dad, we are here to love you!”

Alex was right. We are here to love you. We are here to love our brothers and sisters—friends and strangers alike. That is what the good Samaritan did, and the Savior asks us to go and do likewise.

I believe in Christ’s message of love and in its power to transform lives. Love has transformed mine, and I sincerely pray that it transforms yours. I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See Matthew 22:39.
2. Matthew 22:39.
3. See Luke 10:29–37.
4. Luke 10:37.
5. Luke 10:34.
6. See John 4:5–29.
7. See Anthony Faiola, “The Crisis Next Door,” *Washington Post*, 2 March 2018, [washingtonpost.com/news/world/wp/2018/03/02/feature/i-cant-go-back-venezuelans-are-fleeing-their-crisis-torn-country-en-masse/?utm_term=.c0d172561e81](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/world/wp/2018/03/02/feature/i-cant-go-back-venezuelans-are-fleeing-their-crisis-torn-country-en-masse/?utm_term=.c0d172561e81).