

Background for “Behold the Neighbor”

Text by Justin Lind-Ayres
Music by Philip Biedenbender

From Justin Lind-Ayres:

The story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 is a biblical treasure, well-known and beloved. However, familiarity with a text can lead to assumptions that do not exist. In this story, a lawyer asks Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” The question evokes this treasured parable where the Good Samaritan helps the man stripped, robbed, beaten, and left for dead in a ditch. My own familiarity of the text (and countless interpretations I had heard over the years) instinctively and lazily answered the lawyer’s question, “The man in the ditch is my neighbor.” And though this is true, it is not what Jesus is foremost asserting in this story. It turns out the Good Samaritan “was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers” (36). The call, the charge, the command by Jesus is to be neighbor.

“Behold the Neighbor!” is my effort to help us (me!) see anew the neighbors around us and, ultimately, to see that we are neighbors. In this text, I reach back to Luke 10:23 as the interpretative lens for the parable where Jesus stated to the disciples, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!” See what you? What do your eyes see when you engage the Good Samaritan story? Behold, our holy vision. Behold, the Christ. Behold—neighbor!

This, I believe, is our calling from Jesus—to be the neighbor. To love the neighbor with heart and soul, with strength and mind, is to be the neighbor to one another through the love of Christ. And I believe Augsburg University’s commitment to vocational discovery is really a way for us as a Lutheran institution to foster and empower all people to be neighbors serving in love. This text was written in part to reflect and expand Augsburg’s mission to cultivate servant-neighbors in the world. It wasn’t until Philip Biedenbender put music to this passage that the text truly soared. His work is simply stunning! I am grateful for Philip’s remarkable creative energy and deeply faithful attention to the word of Jesus. He captured the essence of the text opening us to Christ’s command to love likewise. And finally, my deep gratitude to Mark Sedio for enthusiastically embracing this project and enabling the Augsburg Choir to translate the Good Samaritan parable through neighborly eyes...and ears and heart and soul and strength and mind.

From Phil Biedenbender:

The story of “Behold the Neighbor” begins at the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians’ National Conference in July 2017. LutheranArts facilitated a drawing for a series of sabbaticals sponsored by individuals and organizations. I was one of five attendees chosen, and my particular sabbatical was sponsored by Augsburg University in memory of Leland Sateren, renowned composer and long-time conductor of the Augsburg Choir. I chose to use my weeklong respite to compose a piece in his honor.

Willing collaborators for this project were quickly found when Doug Koons, the executive director of LutheranArts, suggested that Augsburg's own Pastor Justin Lind-Ayres write the text, and Mark Sedio, the interim director of the Augsburg Choir, readily agreed to include the piece in their spring program. Together we settled on a theme for the work, and Justin set to work. Within a few months, I was off to the Spirit in the Desert Retreat Center in Carefree, AZ, with Justin's text in hand: a moving poem reflecting on the parable of the Good Samaritan, how we are called "not to serve the neighbor, but to BE the neighbor."

While on the plane to Arizona, I reflected on Justin's text, and was especially struck by two things: first, the words of Jesus that open the poem and set the scene for the Good Samaritan parable: "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see." As I meditated on the meaning of this statement, I sensed an inherent fervency in Christ's words and envisioned a fierce, passionate look in his eyes as he spoke, a hint of sorrow with a question left unsaid, equal parts challenge and heartfelt plea: do you see what you see? Do you truly understand? Please understand.

The second idea that struck me was the nature of the greatest commandment: "Behold the command to love likewise." It seems that many of us have lost—or never found—the true meaning of love in our daily interactions. We have forgotten that love is not a mere emotion but a choice between doing what might seem best for ourselves and doing what is right by others. To love someone is to sacrifice yourself, to willfully submit to an unknown level of discomfort or even suffering in pursuit of something beyond ourselves, as our Savior demonstrated by dying in our place. Love means that we will not give in to prejudice, anger, or fear, but welcome all with open hearts and minds.

These ideas became the structure around which I composed the music: the question "See what you see?" bookending the work, fervently verbalizing the emotion in Jesus's eyes, building to a climax centered on "our command to love likewise," as Christ loves us. With those thoughts first in mind, our prayer might have a better chance of coming true someday: "Traverse the road; O heart be opened. See the stranger; O soul be woken. Bridge the chasm; O strength be renewed. Touch the outcast; O mind be transformed."