

August 23, 2026 | Unity on Maui | Rev. Blaine Tinsley

“Who Is My Neighbor?”

INTRODUCTION

It is one of the shortest questions in the Gospels — just four words. Jesus answered it with a story so disruptive that religious leaders have argued about it ever since. "Who is my neighbor?" sounds like a request for a definition, a list, a boundary. But hiding inside it is a harder question nobody wants to ask out loud: Whom am I allowed to leave out?

THE STORY: JESUS AND THE LAWYER (LUKE 10:25–37)

A Torah scholar stands to test Jesus: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus turns it back; the lawyer answers perfectly — love God fully, love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus affirms him. That should end it. But Luke records five revealing words: wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asks, "And who is my neighbor?" He is not asking to learn. He is asking to draw a line narrow enough to make him righteous without costing too much.

To illustrate, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. The three figures in the parable:

- The Priest — sees the beaten man and passes on the other side. Jesus offers no excuse.
- The Levite — another Temple official whose entire identity is religious service. He also passes.
- The Samaritan — the one the lawyer would never have expected. Jews and Samaritans held centuries of mutual contempt. Yet this Samaritan sees the man, is moved with compassion, and tends his wounds with his own oil and wine. He then lifts him to his animal, pays for the inn, and promises to cover any extra cost.

WHICH OF THESE THREE WAS A NEIGHBOR?

Jesus turns to the lawyer: "Which of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The lawyer asked about the other person's identity — who qualifies. Jesus flipped it entirely. The question is no longer about who is in the ditch. It's about who we choose to be. Unable even to say the word "Samaritan," the lawyer answers: "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus says: "Go and do likewise."

THE QUESTION BEING ASKED RIGHT NOW

"Who is my neighbor?" is the central moral question of this moment — asked at our borders, in our neighborhoods, in legislatures and living rooms, and in the quiet of our own hearts when we drive past someone we have decided not to see. The person in the ditch does not ask for your political affiliation before they need help. Suffering does not wait for our theological permission.

WHO BELONGS INSIDE OUR CIRCLE OF CARE?

Most of us carry working definitions — largely unexamined, largely inherited — of who belongs inside our circle. The coworker we've written off. The family member who is too much trouble. The unhoused person we've learned, very efficiently, not to make eye contact with. The circle-drawing instinct is human and strong. But Jesus just showed us what becomes possible when someone crosses to the other side of the road anyway.

MY GOOD SAMARITAN: MR. CANNON

I lost my mother to a stroke at eight. At twelve, my father died — he brought a barbecue into the cabin of our boat, fell asleep, and never woke up. I was a troubled child: mostly D's, highest grade a C — in P.E. There was a history teacher named Mr. Cannon. We called him Mr. Cannonball — not affectionately. He was strict, not warm, not on anyone's list of favorites. And yet Mr. Cannon called me in after school and offered to tutor me. By the end of the term, I had a B. But the grade was almost beside the point. What he gave me was the experience of being seen — treated as someone worth investing in. He saw it for me until I could see it for myself. He was my Good Samaritan: the one who crossed the road when I was lying in the ditch.

WHY WE NEVER ASK, "WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?"

This question is not answered once — it keeps finding us. Neurologically, the brain reconstructs moral understanding each time we return to it. The 25-year-old's answer is not the 55-year-old's. Suffering softens borders; love shows up in unexpected faces. Spiritually, most of us don't sit with uncomfortable questions — we manage them. We draw the circle and defend it. We hand the question to our tribe and stop asking whether their answer is actually ours.

ACEDIA (AH-SEE-DEE-AH)

The mystics had a word for this avoidance: acedia. We translate it as sloth, but that is not right. Acedia is not laziness — it is the soul's apathy or resistance toward one's spiritual life. The lawyer's question, "And who is my neighbor?" — was acedia dressed in legal language. He wasn't lazy. He was busy maintaining his certainty. The antidote, the mystics said: stay in the cell. Sit with the question rather than flee it.

RAINER MARIA RILKE (1875–1926)

"Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

Not a counsel of passivity — an invitation to let the question grow you. Stop trying to kill it with a quick answer.

OUR UNDERSTANDING MUST KEEP MOVING

In Unity, Truth is living and unfolding — not a fixed proposition but a revelation that keeps moving. The I AM of Exodus is not past tense. It is present, active, ongoing. Our understanding of who our neighbor is must keep moving too. We don't arrive at Truth. We move with it.

WHO IS OUTSIDE MY CIRCLE RIGHT NOW?

The Samaritan didn't consult a definition. He saw a human being in pain and moved. The question was answered in the crossing, not the deliberation. This week, sit with two honest questions:

- Who is outside my circle right now — by habit, assumption, or avoidance?
- What would it look like to cross the road?

Not to fix everything. The Samaritan cared for one person. But he crossed the road. And the world was different because he did.

CLOSING

"Who is my neighbor?" is not answered once and filed away. It keeps presenting itself in every face, every encounter, every moment when we are tempted to look the other way. Every generation must answer it again, freshly. We are that generation. This is our time. The question is still asking us—not "who qualifies," but who will you choose to be?

AFFIRMATION

The love of God moves through me without borders. I see my neighbor in every face. I cross the road.

BLESSING

May you have the courage to let the question find you —
the one that keeps returning, asking to be met by the larger you that has arrived since the last time.
May every face you pass today be a little harder to look away from.

May the road you travel grow wider than you planned.

And if you are the one in the ditch — may you be found. May someone cross the road to you. May you let them.

May the I AM that burns at the heart of all things send you back with fresher eyes and a more willing heart.

Go and do likewise. Amen.