It’s called the “Shema Yisrael” (which in Hebrew means, “Hear, O Israel”) Shema Yisrael— or sometimes, it’s just called the “Shema,” for short. Are you familiar with that? … The Shema? … It’s a short phrase from the 6th chapter of Deuteronomy. The Israelites are gathered around the foot of Mt. Horeb – or Sinai. Moses comes down from the heights of the mountain where he has been talking to God; and he cries out the Lord’s command for all to hear:: “Shema Yisrael – Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” But it doesn’t stop there. This commandment is so important – so central to the lives and faith of God’s People that in the verses that follow, God commands us to keep it in our hearts all the time… to recite the words to our children… to talk about it wherever we are and whatever we are doing… We are to fix the words on our foreheads and write them on the doorknobs of our houses. Every moment… Every day… “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” +++ If this one command could be followed perfectly – completely – then all the others would fall right into place. +++ :: LOVE GOD :: +++ OBEY GOD +++ Have no other Gods +++ +++ … But when the Shema makes its appearance in the New Testament – in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, – something has changed – it has evolved – loving God goes hand in hand with loving your neighbor… Now, loving your neighbor certainly isn’t a NEW idea in the New Testament – it fills the Hebrew Scriptures as well. Christ takes it right out of the 19th chapter of Leviticus, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” +++ BUT he attaches it the Shema – makes it part of the central commandment that we must keep in our hearts, fix to our children, fix on our foreheads and write on our doorposts:: “Love God AND love your neighbor.” +++ They fit like a hand in a glove. +++ If you don’t love your neighbor – you can’t love God. +++ This is a cornerstone of Jesus’ entire ministry:: he stands up for the oppressed – he calls out the wealthy who prop up power structures on the backs of the poor – he confronts religious leaders who care more for their own authority than tending their sheep… BUT, Jesus heals. He comforts. He forgives. +++ Jesus saves.

In today’s reading, whatever his motivations, I think the lawyer who tests Jesus has a good question:: ”Teacher,” he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ 26He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ 27He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” 28And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’ 29But (wanting to justify himself), he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ +++ That’s a question we should all ask ourselves, everyday:: “Who is… MY neighbor?”

Who IS your neighbor, anyway?? Is it the people who live next door – that’s who we usually call our neighbor… “Neighbor” implies some similarity, doesn’t it? So, is it someone who looks like me? Is it someone blessed enough to have been born in the same country as I? +++ I mean, if it’s a matter of life and death to love our neighbor – we need to make sure we know just who we need to be loving to and who we can ignore – right? +++ So, the lawyer asks Jesus: “And who is my neighbor?” +++ And Jesus responds with the Parable of the Good Samaritan – where the man is beaten by robbers and left by the side of the road. The Priest and the Levite, who passed by on the other side, are the ones we’d most expect to take pity on the man and help. But NO – it’s the Samaritan – someone who shares mutual aversion and distrust with the Jews. (Remember two weeks ago, we talked about the Samaritan Village not welcoming Jesus because he had turned his face toward Jerusalem – he was on his way there – where the Jews live – so they wouldn’t receive him.) They wanted nothing to do with the Jews. And that’s what makes the parable’s hero so heroic. He goes out of his way to help someone in need – not because of who the victim is. But simply because his needs are great.

My neighbor is anyone – and everyone – that I encounter. Everyone I could find a way to help if I take the time to look – and pay enough attention to notice … whether I can do something as simple as brightening their day with a smile – or something as hard as giving them the rest of my day to help them through theirs. When he found the man half dead beside the road, the Good Samaritan was ready to be his neighbor – prepared to go out of his way to help however he could. He bandaged the man’s wounds, put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, paid the innkeeper, and promised to come back to pay any additional expenses. “Loving your neighbor as yourself” means
treasuring every person, no matter how different they are from you. It means lamenting every hunger pang, mourning every victim of violence, having compassion for every foreigner desperate for a new safe life, and weeping at every act of war or terror. +++ And then, once you’ve treasured, lamented, mourned, had compassion, and wept – it means rolling up your sleeves and doing something about it.

This morning, I’ve invited three people to speak with me as part of my sermon (STAND UP). Ned Rowan, Hunter Eberhart and Calum Anderson found a way to “do something about it” this week – Linda and I joined them as chaperones. They participated in the RISE mission program in Friendship, NY. They slept on the floor of a high school gym and they worked all day, Monday through Friday, to help a new neighbor. I’m sure they’ll tell you all about her and the work they did. So, let me turn the floor over to our RISE mission team. (After they speak, clap for them…) [A NOTE FOR READERS OF THE PRINT VERSION: TO HEAR THE STUDENTS’ COMMENTS, YOU CAN LISTEN TO THE SERMON ONLINE AT https://www.fpceh.org/sermons-bulletins]

I’ll add my own short anecdote about the week. As I do,… early in the week I was evaluating whether this mission opportunity was the right choice – at this time – for this stage of developing our youth program. And, the Holy Spirit answered my question in an unexpected way… There were about 60 kids on RISE last week, from 4 churches, working on 8 sites. Every night at dinner, they’d draw a couple of names from a basket to give away a silly little door prize that probably came from the Dollar Store. The first night, Calum’s name was the first one chosen. The second night, Hunter’s came out first. And – I kid you not – the third night, Ned’s name was drawn first – he got that beautiful flashing flamingo necklace. We had 3 students out of 60 and their names were drawn first on Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday. It’s possible that was just a coincidence – but isn’t that what the work of the Holy Spirit often looks like? To me, it was a confirmation:: these young men were right where they were supposed to be… when they were supposed to be there.

At RISE, like any church mission, you wish you could do more. There is so much need in Western New York’s Upper Appalachia. You get a specific job – like reskirting the bottom of a trailer in our case – and once you get there you also want to replace the windows, lay new boards on the porch, tow away the old rusty car, wash the dog, and make their grandchildren visit more often. But a few high school youth can’t do all that in a week. +++ The motto of RISE is “Warmer, Safer, Drier.” It helps us to stay reasonable about what we can do – and to stay focused. If our team can help make one home warmer, safer, drier – it was worth the trip. In our case, Bobbie might still have to tape plastic over her windows to keep out the gusting mountain winds in winter… On snowy mornings, she might still have to hold extra tight to her handrail at the bottom of her steps, where the footing isn’t level… But she WILL NOT have icy winds whipping beneath her trailer, freezing her pipes and floor. Bobbie will be warmer. +++ +++

That’s how neighbors are. You can’t live someone’s life for them – you give them the respect and space to live their own lives. Just like our CUBA mission teams can’t solve the economic challenges facing our friends there – but we join hands with them to praise God – and we do what we can. +++ Neighbors pay attention. They notice when there’s trouble along the road – and they stop to help. +++ When the Good Samaritan found the man half dead by the side of the road – he didn’t try to solve the man’s relationship with his parents. He didn’t pay off all his debts or buy him a new home. He didn’t cure him of a disease or have a ton of food delivered to his house. +++ He paid attention to the most pressing problems. He bandaged his wounds, brought him to the inn, and paid his emergency expenses. +++

This morning, I wonder… What do you find along your roads? There’s so much there to find when you pay attention, along the side of your road. Do you pass by on the other side – or do you stop to help? Who are your neighbors? Local… National… International… Who do you know of that suffers? And can you help – even a little? +++ +++ +++

Hear, O Christian, the Great Commandment for the Age of Christ – repeat it everyday, write it on your hearts, and teach it to your children: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.