Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Deitrich Bonhoeffer, and Jesus:
An Ethical Examination of The Parable of the Good Samaritan

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Introduction: Luke 10:29-37 (NRSV)

> *But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."*

The parable of The Good Samaritan stands throughout Christian history as one of the most compelling and convicting of Jesus's ethical instructions to those who would claim to be his disciples. We are often like the famed lawyer in the story, inclined to reduce the definition of "neighbor" to ever-smaller meanings that ultimately require nothing of us. It is a story not primarily about a desperate man dying in the road, but about how those who might otherwise define themselves as fine upstanding faith leaders are forced to reckon with what the apostle James called a dead faith (James 2:14) when compared to the universally and dangerously altruistic compassion demonstrated here by "enemies."

Among modern white American Christians for whom Christianity has become more an exclusive club of insiders than an expansive community of God's beloved, and who desperately need a whole-person (heart, soul, mind, body) revival to draw us to acts of justice and mercy especially when such discipleship is costly, this story takes on profound importance. The Good Samaritan commands modern readers' attention to both the systemic injustices that create "bloody ways" for our neighbors, *and* to the personal excuses that keep us from living our faith in risky, neighbor-loving ways. For those of us living at social locations of privilege and power, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's commentary speaks directly to our predicament: Most of us, when challenged to neighborly action, will naturally ask, "what will happen to me if I help this man?" But Jesus's parable in Luke 10 declares that a good neighbor always reverses the question and instead asks, "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to *him*?"[1] In so doing, Jesus transforms the conversation from one of theological acrobatics performed by legal experts into a one about "concrete expression[s] of compassion on a dangerous road."[2] In doing so, Jesus makes concrete, whole-person demands of all who would claim to love God and be Christ's disciples.

Part I: Summary and Exegesis of Luke 10

The Parable of the Good Samaritan begins in verse 25 with Luke's particular telling of the Greatest Commandment narrative (paralleled in Matt. 22:34-40, Mk. 12:28-31) which delves beyond the *what* of the Greatest Commandment into the *how* and the *whom.* All three synoptics portray the lawyer as setting a trap for Jesus who expertly passes the test. Contemporary Jews, especially legal experts who regularly sparred in dialogue at the Temple,[3] would have been familiar with "the law on which all others hang," and would have presumed a standard of God-love based on Deuteronomy 6:5 and self- and neighbor-love based on Leviticus 19:18. Jesus's answer to "love your neighbor as yourself" is therefore not especially radical.[4] What is significant in Luke's telling is that the real conversation begins at the end of the Greatest Commandment discussion, when the Lukan scribe baits Jesus with the follow-up question, "who is my neighbor?"

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[1] Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Gift of Love: Sermons from* Strength to Love *and Other Preachings* (Boston: Beacon Street Press,1963), 26.

[2] Ibid, 21.

[3] David L. Tiede, Ph. D., "The Gospel According to Luke," in *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, gen.ed. Wayne A. Meeks (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 1980, footnotes on Luke 10:26.

[4] Robert C. Tannehill, "Jesus and a Lawyer Discuss Love of Neighbor (10:25-37)" in *Abington New Testament Commentaries*, gen. ed. Victor Paul Furnish (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), https://www-ministrymatters-com.luthersem.idm.oclc.org/library/#/abtc/006de5b94ad35f9343f7a61e14ba65af/jesus-and-a-lawyer-discuss-love-of-neighbor-1025-37.html.

Jesus deftly sets his answer within a particular context with particular characters and particular presumptions, all of which paint an unquestionably clear picture for his hearers and provide modern students great insight into its overarching ethical significance. Through the short parable, Jesus fundamentally flips the scribe's question from one that focuses on the object of love into one which centers the subject — the one who loves — by asking "what kind of neighbor am I?"[5] Here, a good neighbor is not merely a law-abiding Jew but a person, even an "other," who *acts*. The love Jesus describes as defining those who will inherit eternal life does justice and justifies the doer (v. 29) by dissolving social hierarchies and reducing cultural requirements and limited definitions of "neighbor" to rubble. It ultimately forces listeners to reconsider who's "in" the community of God.[6]

Jesus begins the parable by directing his Jewish listeners' imagination to the Jericho Road, a narrow, winding, and isolated 17-mile-long rocky descent covering 3,330 feet from the hilltop city of Jerusalem to Jericho's sea-level desert. The slow and perilous descent made Jericho Road notoriously dangerous, offering easy hiding and escape for bandits to terrorize travelers without fear of pursuit or repercussion.[7] It became widely known as "the Bloody Way," both for its unforgiving terrain and for the terrorists who lay in wait to catch the vulnerable unaware.[8]

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[5] Miguel Angel Carbajal Baca, "Virtue Ethics in the Parable of the Good Samaritan: Shaping Christian Character 2011" (Thesis: Boston College), 18-19, July 2011, http://hdl.handle.net/2345/2472

[6] Alan R. Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections: Luke 10:25-42, The Love of God and Neighbor," in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX*, ed. dir. Harriett Jane Olson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), https://www-ministrymatters-com.luthersem.idm.oclc.org/library/#/tnib/7c4795bc9d82c3123ed0c6c4fc77cb35/luke-1025-42-the-love-of-god-and-neighbor.html.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Carbajal Baca, 22.

On this road, Jesus introduces Ἄνθρωπός τις — "a certain man" or "any man"[9] — robbed, beaten, stripped, and left for dead. Without his clothing, possessions, or any other identifiers beyond τις, hearers could know nothing about his identity or social status apart from his need and would have presumed him to be a Jew for whom neighborly care was expected and prescribed.[10] Into this context with this any-man, Jesus presents two men of status: a Priest and a Levite. Despite expert knowledge, and presumably understanding that other Jews ought to be considered their neighbors, they passed by him the half-dead man without rendering aid.

Given the narrow and rocky terrain, it is even possible they had to physically step over the dying man in order to pass and go on their way. The Jericho Road made a beaten and bloodied person impossible to miss or ignore; one could only refuse aid through a deliberate act of will. In this way, Jesus directly (if implicitly) confronts the presumed moral superiority of religious leaders, not as an anti-Semite but as a prophet among knowers of the law whose aim is to introduce "a God who inverts social statuses…[presenting salvation as] relief from the powers and policies that cause and sustain the sufferings of the downtrodden."[11]

It is only after watching two men who ought to have helped him leave that the certain man is finally aided by a Samaritan, an enemy of Jews. This helper assumes great physical risk to care for the man on the road and extraordinary financial cost in seeing to his full recovery, all for an enemy who may otherwise despise him.

It is important to pause here and note that Luke's gospel was likely written between 57-63 C.E.. His contemporary readers would have had in mind both the long history of Jewish-Samaritan enmity as well as the bloody history of the Ginae massacre of 51 C.E. when Jews retaliated against the Samaritans of Ginae for having killed some

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[9] James Strong, *The New Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), BibleHub.com, Strong's Greek #444 and #5100, accessed April 20. 2022, https://biblehub.com/interlinear/luke/10.htm, https://biblehub.com/greek/444.htm, https://biblehub.com/greek/5100.htm.The Greek word *Anthrōpos* literally means "a human being," here assumed to be male. The Greek word *tis* may mean "certain" or "any," indicating he was a particular person but otherwise unnamed or -defined.

[10] Culpepper.

[11] Matthew L. Skinner, *A Companion to the New Testament: The Gospels and Acts,* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017), 192, 173.

Galileans on pilgrimage for Passover. This recent violence would have made the story of a Good Samaritan and two morally questionable Jewish leaders all the more scandalous.[12] Such was the enmity between the warring factions that, as New Testament scholar Dr. Amy-Jill Levine notes, "the first-century Jewish person hearing this parable might well think: There is no such thing as a 'good Samaritan.'"[13]

Not only does the Samaritan stop and take time to bandage his enemy's wounds and rescue him from imminent death in the middle of the Bloody Way, he takes the rescued man to an inn and spends what amounted to at least two day's wages up-front, and promises payment of whatever else might be owed thereafter to ensure the man was fully recovered before traveling again. Whether two denarii would have provided for two week's care, as some scholars say, or two month's, the sum was extravagant, especially coupled with the guarantee of future installments on his enemy's behalf.[14] Jesus's listeners would have understood the Samaritan's neighborliness on this road to have been expressed at extraordinary personal physical risk, as the bandits no doubt could have emerged to kill him too. And he took on great financial risk as well, given that length of the man's recovery was unknowable and that innkeepers throughout the ancient world were considered "morally dubious figures who were thought to take advantage of their clientele in any way possible in order to advance their own prospects," including price gouging on more dangerous routes like the Jericho Road.[15] All of these personal risks the Samaritan willingly took on would have been thrown into even starker relief against the inactions of the Priest and Levite who refused to help their neighbor in crisis.

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[12] James Hart, "The Good Samaritan is a Story About Race," ForTheCity (Web Archives), February 2011, accessed April 11, 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20200810163323/https://www.forthecity.org/blog/the-good-samaritan-is-a-storty-about-race/. See also: Flavius Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews: 20.118-136*, https://lexundria.com/j_aj/20.118-20.136/wst

[13] Amy-Jill Levine, "The Many Faces of the Good Samaritan-Most Wrong," Φιλοσοφία, January 16, 2012, accessed April 11, 2022, https://conversasaovento.blogspot.com/2012/01/many-faces-of-good-samaritanmost-wrong.html.

[14] American Bible Society, "The Good Samaritan's Money," accessed April 6, 2022, http://bibleresources.americanbible.org/resource/the-good-samaritan-039-s-money

[15] Bruce Longenecker, "The Story of the Samaritan and the Innkeeper (Luke 10:30-35): A Study in Character Rehabilitation," *Biblical Interpretation* 17, no. 4 (2009): pp. 422-447, accessed April 6, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1163/156851509x447645m, 432.

Finally, Jesus ends this scandalous story by asking, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (v. 36) The scribe whose question laid the original trap is now forced to confess that the law is not about limited definitions of “neighbor” which provide escape from caring for everyone, but about *being* neighborly even and especially when it is costly. Jesus’s final words in verse 37 are both a command and sucker-punch: “Go and be like your enemy, the Samaritan.”

Part 2: Dr. King, Bonhoeffer, and Dangerously Altruistic Obedience

Jesus re-centers the conversation around how and for whom we ought to *be* good neighbors, and Deitrich Bonhoeffer situates the discussion in the realm of disciplined obedience, but it is the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who invites readers to dive deeper into the immediacy of context.

For Bonhoeffer, the question “who is my neighbor?” is itself a “satanic” one “from the pompous ‘who are always being instructed and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth,’ who are ‘holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power’” to transform the inner person.[16] The inquisitor seeks not to clarify the direction of obedience, but to “justify himself” (v. 26) by finding or creating philosophical or legal loopholes through which to circumvent the costs of discipleship. Thus Bonhoeffer explains Christ’s simple answer: “You yourself are the neighbor. Go and *be obedient* in acts of love. Being a neighbor is not a qualification of someone else; *it is their claim on me*, nothing else.”[17] To him, discipleship manifests not in questions and theological debates, but in simple, unambiguous obedience against which questions serve only as excuses and obfuscations.[18]

Dr. King, though, takes the conversation into the dangerous intersection where personal obligation to those in need meets the systemic injustices exposed by the very existence of such notoriously dangerous places, and asks, “what will you do here?” He locates “neighbor” not in the confines of theological discussion but “in a life situation” through which the Samaritan, defined by his universal, dangerous, and excessive altruism, is good “because he made concern for others the first law of his life.”[19] The Good Samaritan cared for a stranger — a presumed Jew, his enemy — because that stranger needed care. His neighborliness was defined by proximity and need, not social location, status, or tribal affiliation.

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[16] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works - Readers Edition)* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 38, Kindle.
[17] Ibid., emphasis mine.
[18] Ibid.

Perhaps neither the Priest nor Levite offered help because they were legitimately afraid of what might happen to them should they stop long enough to help. Perhaps they, like many, traveled the road with nothing but the clothes on their backs in order to avoid being targeted, and thus had no means of assisting. Perhaps, Dr. King notes, the Priest and Levite had good cause to pass by without offering aid as they were “on their way to an organizational meeting of a Jericho Road Improvement Association,” so intent on confronting the root causes of the injustices common to Jericho Road that they couldn’t be waylaid by that particular need in that particular moment.[20]

Regardless, it seems clear that their foremost consideration was not, “what will happen to him if I don’t help?” But it *was* the Samaritan’s chief concern, and he acted accordingly. And Jesus’s invitation to his hearers at the close — to religious leaders and experts who want to obey the law but remain unwilling to take the risks it requires — is to measure ourselves rightly. As Dr. King preached,

> “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk his position, his prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others. In dangerous valleys and hazardous pathways, he will lift some bruised and beaten brother to a higher and more noble life.”[21]

For it is Christ who was the Good Samaritan, and it is into His likeness we are invited to transform.

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[19] King, 22.
[20] Ibid, 24.
[21] Ibid., 27.

Part 3: Summary and Interpretation

We may have myriad discussions about how we relate to and perceive “enemies” and “others,” and how prone we are to assuming the very best of ourselves and the worst from “them,” but these are not my focus. Rather, I want to examine the ethics of this story from the perspective of those who have the privilege, status, and social and financial currency to act but routinely make excuses not to. This is not about the broken-down half-dead man, or about avoiding the exploitation of opportunists when caring for the vulnerable. It is about who the Good Samaritan was and who we are called to be in response.

Those of us with status and privilege are often and perhaps inherently disinclined to take costly risks. Our deeply individualistic cultural and religious ethos convinces us that both are hard-earned and must be protected and preserved above all, often preventing us from taking concrete steps toward justice and mercy. While we may, for example, be horrified by the plight of immigrants and refugees at our borders, we do not divest from institutions that profit from their unjust incarceration or grieve the violence to which we return them across the border. White people may express fury over the killings of unarmed Black men by police officers who are rarely held accountable for their crimes, but we do not take the concrete risks of placing our white bodies in protective positions by filming police; by naming and disrupting white supremacy when it terrorizes our siblings at Black churches, mosques, and synagogues; or when it attacks our Capitol in attempts to overturn fair and legal elections; or by blocking highways and occupying brutal police precincts alongside and in physical solidarity with our Black siblings. We may decry attacks on women’s reproductive rights or on the trans community’s right to access necessary healthcare to preserve their mental and physical well-being. Yet we remain unwilling to use our bodies, time, and money to transport those in need to providers who offer treatment, or to help pay for medical costs insurers refuse to cover. We may express solidarity with the unhoused, unemployed, and overburdened during a global pandemic, and amplify the voices of radicals calling for debt, work, rent, and mortgage strikes, and shelter for all — all of which require critical mass for maximum impact — but when the rubber meets the road and the first of the month rolls around, we dutifully pay our bills hoping that *someone else* will take up the cause because we cannot afford to risk losing any social or financial capital right now.

Others of us circumvent the crisis altogether. As Rev. Traci Blackmon of Ferguson, MO, powerfully put it in her sermon at 2019's Festival of Homiletics,[22] not all of us step over or around the dying man lying in the road. Some of us exercise our privilege and protect our status by traveling miles out of our way to avoid the Jericho Roads — and Florissant Avenues and Southside Chicagos and North Minneapolises and refugee internment camps — taking pains to shelter ourselves entirely from marginalized peoples' lived reality in those places. We actively refuse to look upon cultural and social realities that make us uncomfortable. We invest in narratives that criminalize the victims of systemic oppression, violence, poverty, and homelessness, and defend their oppressors. We buy into the lie that those who suffer create and perpetuate their own deadly conditions. Instead of acting to end injustice, we renounce any echoes of our own responsibility to our neighbors, and self-righteously thank God and cops for protecting us from such a life. Instead of shedding our learned and practiced ignorance around such matters, we respond to calls to defund and abolish the prison and police industrial complexes with even louder calls for increased funding of institutions that neither prevent violence nor address its causes, but exist by design to protect the wealth and status of the powerful.[23] [24]

In either case, the bottom line is *we all know where Jericho Road is and we know what's happening to our neighbors there*. Yet too few of us ever act to aid these neighbors, much less transform the Bloody Way into a safe route for all travelers. It is easier to solemnly say, “Next time I’ll stop to help,” or to hide out in our safe communities while decrying the horrors of Jericho Road as the product of its inhabitants, than it is to confront the builders and beneficiaries of such quarantined danger.[25] Rather than using our privilege and access to sanctify the Image of God in our most vulnerable neighbors by demanding and creating just outcomes for everyone, especially those on the Jericho Road, we dehumanize and then sacrifice them to the gods of our own comfort.

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[22] Rev. Traci Blackmon, Personal notes from her sermon at the 2019 Festival of Homiletics, May 16, 2019.

[23] Kinjo Kiema, "Police don't stop crime, but you wouldn't know it from the news," Prism Reports, February 23, 2022, https://prismreports.org/2022/02/23/police-dont-stop-crime-but-you-wouldnt-know-it-from-the-news/

[24] To learn about the USA's deeply embedded pro-policing and pro-prison ideologies, their roots in the post-emancipation Reconstruction era, and the modern movement to defund and abolish the carceral state, visit www.mpd150.org. I also highly recommend *We Were Eight Years in Power* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Becoming Abolitionists* by Derecka Purnell, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* by Mariame Kaba, and *Are Prisons Obsolete?* by Angela Davis.

In these and so many other ways, our attempts to cleverly narrow our definition of neighbor to those we are already inclined to befriend reveal us to be in greater functional solidarity with the lawyer who laid the trap than with the Incarnate Christ who disarmed it by reversing the question. And yet Jesus’s parable of the Good Samaritan is nevertheless a good-faith invitation and exploration of how to obey the Greatest Commandment to love God with our whole selves — heart, soul, mind, body — by taking excessive and dangerous risks for those on the roads we travel and the ones we avoid. It is a reminder that God is born to and through the least and lowest, the exploited and despised. It is a reminder that the self-protective instinct to demand neighborliness from others is matched only by the intrinsic moral and ethical imperative to *be* a good neighbor — an imperative that is neither exclusive nor endemic to Christianity or any other religion, but is profoundly human and can show up in anyone, even our enemies. It is a promise that God does not belong exclusively to Jews or Samaritans, to Christians or Muslims, to this tribe or that one, to “us” and not “them,” but that God’s Kin-dom is made manifest on earth in every resounding “Yes!” given to the question, “*will you be* a good neighbor right here and now?”

Opportunities to be a good neighbor will abound as long as the Bloody Way remains the part of our cities in which violence and dispossession are understood and accepted as the tax we all pay to keep other roads safe and travelable. And the parabolic indictment against us who refuse the call will stand so long as we uphold the collective agreement to preserve the boundaries around the Bloody Way in order to ensure its violence stays within so those with the privilege of time and resources can stay out, go around, and be unbothered by what we choose not to see.

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[25] For a thorough look at the history of redlining and the systematic destruction of poor and BIPOC communities to accommodate white flight and gentrify communities, I recommend Richard Rothstein’s *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*. He examines how high-risk neighborhoods were designed to be food deserts and toxic waste dumps (as in Flint, MI and north Minneapolis), from which nothing good is expected to come (John 1:46), and which municipalities flood with blight but otherwise neglect and divest from.

Undoubtedly, what drives our agreement to preserve and contain the status quo of the Bloody Way is our underlying fear of what would happen should the borders blur and the Bloody Road become the Bloody System of Roads. Should the violence spill out into our protected streets, then all who can afford the luxury of ignorance would be forced to look at the violence and know it as our own. All would be compelled to see and count how many bodies we have left for dead. All would have to reckon with the inevitable consequence of our refusal to be good neighbors who boldly travel the the Bloody Way to treat its wounded and restore its wounders, and to transform the Way entirely.

But that is precisely why Christ brings such imagery to bear, for when we are forced to look we are compelled to act by making the road safer. Upon looking, we are shaken out of the decaying skin of rugged individualism and are more inclined to join the community of good neighbors needed to hold the space, protect its travelers. We become more bold and willing to raise the mirror to those who remain invested in preserving the Bloody Way and committed to ignoring both the impact of its violence and their participation therein.

The community of good neighbors occupies and transforms the Road. They paint streets with the names of lives stolen by the State. They set up medic tents and food tables, host uninterrupted vigils, and build memorials. They treat the wounded and meet the immediate needs of travelers along the Way *while* organizing to persuade lawmakers to invest in systemic changes that ensure better long-term outcomes.

Good neighbors leave water and snacks for migrants crossing dangerous borders, and demand safe and healthy living conditions within makeshift refugee camps. They make clear paths for pregnant people to be escorted into reproductive healthcare centers, and use their bodies and voices to distract picketers who might threaten their safety. They arrange for trans youth to receive transition care and provide safe passage thereto even when parents, churches, and governments threaten their lives and the lives of helpers. They commit to breaking unjust laws, and to joining the critical mass of protestors needed to pass just ones.

And some good neighbors, like Heather Heier and Deona Marie Knajdek, will die holding the space and protecting travelers on the Bloody Way, because both the lives of abandoned and the ground on which they suffer are holy; and because they consider their ethical and moral obligation to make every Way safe from every threat and every violence, for everyone to be sacred.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is, in sum, Jesus's call to practice the holiness and justice that we preach in radical, disruptive, and costly ways. He issues a provocative summons to act with immediacy because our choices have real, tangible import and reflect who and whose we are. He stresses to us who claim discipleship in the USA, where our religion is so often marked by selfish individuality divorced from community, that there is no me without us. He warns us that because our choices have moral implications, we are obligated to act responsibly and selflessly to ensure we neither harm others nor leave them to be harmed. It is a damning reminder that religious piety and skillful theological acrobatics are no match for the one who loves others with their life and livelihood. It is an invitation to dangerously altruistic obedience, which transforms us not into heroes or saviors, but into good neighbors committed simply and wholly to doing "what we can, with what we've got, where we are."[26]

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[26] Squire Bill Widener of Widener's Valley, Virginia. Pronouns adapted from "you" to "we." "Although this quote is widely attributed to Theodore Roosevelt, he credits it to [Widener] in his *Autobiography*, Chapter IX," https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Learn-About-TR/TR-Quotes/Do%20what%20you%20can%20%20with%20what%20you%20ve%20got%20%20where%20you%20are?from=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theodorerooseveltcenter.org%2FSearch%3Fr%3D1%26searchTerms%3Ddo%2520what%2520you%2520can

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