

Who is My Neighbor?

Luke 10:25-37

There is a danger in attempting to preach a sermon on this scripture. We have heard this story all our Christian lives and know it as a snapshot of how we recognize kindness and compassion. In fact anyone asked to state the *essence* of Christianity (and in a religiously pluralistic society Christians are asked to do that, both implicitly and explicitly, every day) we would not err too greatly by pointing to this parable of Jesus. The story of "The Good Samaritan" is probably Jesus' most familiar parable.

Unfortunately, such familiarity—as the saying goes—can also breed a certain contempt; for there is a tendency to reduce the parable to simplistic terms: "Be nice like the Samaritan, not nasty like the clergy!" True goodness and obedience to the spirit of the divine imperative in this parable are not so easily managed.

The lawyer who stood up to test Jesus understood the law. He was, after all, a lawyer! In response to the lawyer's question about eternal life, Jesus cut to the chase: "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" Likely believing his life to be behavioral proof of the obedience of faith, he quoted the law. But he could not leave well enough alone. When Jesus told him to love God with everything in him, and to love his neighbor as himself, he wanted to know exactly what the law commanded and its limitations.

There is, of course, a bit of the lawyer in all of us. We want rules, boundaries, norms, and codes of discipleship. Here the significant question is often a question that asks after definition and therefore desires to set a limit: precisely whom am I to love as myself? We want control. We want to keep the presupposition that we live lives of discipleship as demonstrated by a life marked by knowing the good

from evil, rather than a life meant and purposed to know only God and God's mercy.

The story Jesus told the lawyer—the story we attempt to tell others in the hospital room, around the meeting table, before an open grave—is the story that casts us as those acted upon by a love whose limitless goodness we cannot fathom. Jesus asked the lawyer to see himself as the one on that dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho. He traveled that road believing that obedience was the behavioral proof of faith, where an increasingly refined understanding of the law's demands had placed human opinion and tradition on a par with revelation. Beaten and stripped of control, he was left helpless and half dead by the side of the road. The keepers of the tradition, the tradition by which he had justified himself, simply passed him by. Somehow their definition of the good did not compel them to love him as they love themselves. Rather, another character traveled the same road he had traveled—an unlikely one came near, saw, and was moved with pity. We are not told what reflective background the Samaritan brought to his act of mercy, but if we have any depth of experience and self-knowledge, we know that such behavior is neither automatic nor unthinking. To fully understand we have to think of ourselves as the person in the ditch and then ask, "Is there anyone, from any group, about whom we'd rather die than acknowledge, 'She offered help' or 'He showed compassion'?" Or, is there any group whose members might rather die than help us?

The unfortunate one in the ditch represents as much of a nuisance to the Samaritan as to the two "religious." To move an individual from the condition of "natural" self-preoccupation to one of profound concern for others, the whole gospel—with the cross at its center—is required.

Do not mistake it: the "message" here is stunningly simple—though it is not simplistic. Even the scheming "lawyer" or scholar of the Scriptures, bent on self-

justification, grasped that at once. Who was the neighbor? Unable on account of his religious exclusivity to answer straightforwardly, "The Samaritan," he replied, "The one who showed him kindness" (v. 37 NEB).

While we may fault him for failing to acknowledge that the real neighbor was a despised foreigner, a believer in a rival creed, we should find it remarkable that this "expert in the law" named *kindness* as the true mark of "the neighbor." That puts the matter in terms wonderfully appropriate today, for it is precisely "kindness" that is so conspicuously absent from the life of our world—a world driven by competition, greed, and individualism, and a world whose most ethically minded often seem apt to be more concerned for rights than for forgiveness, for justice than for mercy, for equality than for compassion.

The late Kurt Vonnegut, that crypto-evangelist, grasped the essence of Christianity when he was asked by a young American from Pittsburgh, "Please tell me it will all be okay"—which is perhaps the contemporary American equivalent of asking for eternal life. "Welcome to Earth, young man," Vonnegut said. "It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It's round and wet and crowded. At the outside, Joe, you've got about a hundred years here. There's only one rule that I know of: ... Joe, you've got to be *kind*."

What Vonnegut did not say (though one suspects he knew it well enough) is that human kindness, when it is real, is only our poor response to the kindness of the One who made us and who tries to keep us human,

For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of the mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.

The *great* lesson of this parable—for Christians today—can be glimpsed only if the biblical ethic of kindness is put together, as it is in the parable, with the

recognition that such behavior frequently emanates from unexpected sources, and in doing so calls *us* up short. Jesus used the "Samaritan" in his story but we could use "Muslim," "Sikh," "Buddhist," "Jew," or for some of us even "Catholics." Jesus is telling us genuine goodness and moral authenticity cannot be restricted to any one people or creed and do not depend upon having learned the "right" theoretical answers! We Christians ought to recognize that there is in the human spirit a certain "impulse to kindness" that may or may not be the consequence of this or that creed, moral code, or faith tradition. **Douglas John Hall**

Last week I was reminded of what it means to be neighbor. Alicia Fletcher Clinton reminded us of how her mother Harriett purchased a meal for a person who was begging for money at a downtown festival, and how Alicia attempts to follow in her mother's pattern of being a neighbor when she sees people in need. I saw a young woman who was distressed and lonely befriended by a older woman who asked her to let her be the young woman's neighbor. I called to comfort a member this week, but they were the one to comfort and encourage me. At my job I try hard to give respect to those we serve and I am often blessed in return. Those father's day pins that were distributed had a blessing in the language of our brothers and sisters in the Catholic community. We are blessed by our neighbors, and those neighbors may not be those we traditionally call neighbor.

Who is the one who proved neighbor? Who is the one who loved God with heart, mind, soul, and strength, and so loved the neighbor as the self? For some it may be the homeless person, or the person with the disability, or the person from another faith tradition.

Suddenly this familiar parable, often used to encourage good Christians to aid a traveler whose car has broken down on a dark and stormy night, regardless to later litigation, has become a parable that challenges us to face our prejudices. When the lawyer at the end of the story realized he, and not Jesus, was the one who was

being put to the test, he managed to say that the one who had proved neighbor was the one who showed mercy. He could not bring himself to say the word

"Samaritan." **Cynthia A. Jarvis**

Who will we allow to be our neighbor? So often we are proud and think we have the monopoly on the right way to worship and the right doctrine. We don't allow ourselves to be blessed by others. Who is my neighbor – the one who shows mercy and kindness. Like Jesus told the lawyer – go and do likewise!

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