

"Who is my neighbor?" (10July16)
Luke10:25-37; Deut30:9-14; Col1:1-14

My favorite line in this so-called Good Samaritan story used to be the lawyer's first question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

More on that another time, though, because this week, I've been bemused by the lawyer's second question: "and who is my neighbor?" Maybe Ken Streit can advise if this is a lawyerly brain trying to chase down the loose ends and leave no stone of the law unturned. But it's still foolish. If the question were unasked, if the lawyer would've left well enough alone, he could've gone off self-satisfied, thinking, "Well, the folks on my block like me pretty well. I get along fine with people at the office. Even my teenage daughter manages to put up with me." Then that lawyer could've kept a nice, small vision of his responsibility and probably remained smugly self-assured.

But he instead opened up a whole 'nother can of worms. The question slipped out: "And who is my neighbor?" Why didn't he just stay self-congratulatory, figuring he was doing fine? Later in the Gospel, a similar guy is praying (or sort of praying, but more gloating) that he's much better than the sinners. He saw himself favorably compared against thieves, rogues, adulterers, and a nearby tax collector. But!—that story concludes, in its coup de grâce—all who exalt themselves will be humbled (18:14).

So did pride make this lawyer ask the "who is my neighbor" question? Or earnest desire? Could he not keep his mouth shut? The story says the reason is that he wanted to justify himself.

That is all too often the problem. In regards to God and the world around us, we have a burning desire to show we've got it figured out and are acting just how we're supposed to...or at least on a bit better footing than others.

We keep trying at self-justification, even though in our hearts, we know and trust that this faith and God's own self is about peace, forgiveness and grace, redemption and lives recreated and made whole, transforming sinners into saints. If you need that word of good news, please hang onto it, because in spite of salvation and unconditional love and all that Jesus came to reveal, giving freely, still with the lawyer we slip back in, unable to help ourselves in wanting to be proven right. We repeatedly dive headlong into the task of trying to justify ourselves.

So when we gather for church, we may accept a few challenges on a to-do list, but that really aims again to feel good about ourselves, to be reassured in our self-righteousness, so we can claim we're doing okay, that at least we're trying to be kind in our families, and striving to be the sort of citizens we should be, and not too nasty to those around us, so God must want to pat us on the back as much as we do.

In asking Jesus, the lawyer was presumably hoping for a nice, tidy legal category, that neighbors are those in a three-door vicinity, or they share your religion and values, or can relate to your socioeconomic status and past-times, that neighbors look like you and act like you. You know, something easy.

But Jesus blows the whole thing wide open. Not only do those in the story closest to the lawyer fail to recognize the beaten up half-dead guy who really could use some care. What's worse, Jesus goes on to pick out a rotten Samaritan as exemplary, as the model. This is shocking. Samaritans were sort of a corrupt version of Jews. This lawyer would say Samaritans read their Bibles wrong and misplaced devotion and had gone astray in following religious practice. Yet Jesus commends him!

For much of our culture, the parallel today of a Good Samaritan might be to highlight a Good

Muslim as the one doing it right, which would be so unexpected or even heretical for those who claim Muslims are infidels or prone to violence or somehow inferior. Or, to look at it from the other side (since we can't be so self-righteous in justifying our worldview), it might be a conservative fundamentalist Christian who protests against Planned Parenthood or transgender bathroom rights. Since a "Good Samaritan" simply has become a synonym for a "do-gooder," we can't hear how Jesus' example originally functioned instantly to undermine self-justification that demeaned the other.

After our self-assuredness is undercut, when we are stopped from claiming we're so well on track, when blinders are removed to illustrate our privilege, when we have to re-evaluate what's right, then we don't list tasks to be completed, but see actual neighbors, as deserving or needing care, opening channels of compassion. Having identified love as the greatest commandment, as our supreme goal, Jesus brings us across the threshold from self-justification to obligation on behalf of our neighbors.

Which instantly becomes an enormous question, always determined by your own situations and contexts, of who your neighbor is. So I can't enumerate or explain what needs to be done; instead, we can encounter examples of "who is my neighbor":

I continue to be impressed at how well we offer care for each other in these two congregations. But maybe that reinforces this great opportunity to be outside, so we aren't closed off in a sanctuary and can more directly see our neighborhood. This raised a question as we were preparing for this service: realizing that our music may be intrusive, we worried about offending or bothering the people we're trying to reach out to. But we also wanted to share our joy and broadcast a welcome. On the third

hand, we can't presume that what these neighbors need is to be part of our worship service, though I continue to struggle with that.

Asking what our neighbors do need and how we may offer service also fits with being outside today. We can look to see reminders that neighbors are well-served by the summer Kids in the Garden program. There are those who receive from our food pantry gardens.

Our vision of neighbors is also broadened as we witness the restored health of prairie plants blooming and song sparrows calling and the buzz of insects. These aren't just part of our surroundings, nor natural "resources" for our use, but are neighbors, sisters and brothers in creation.

That broad view asking about the wellbeing of others prior to our own utility can also raise questions about the source of our lunch or the labels inside our clothes. How do these help or harm the many producers, of farmers and garment workers and factory employees, and soil health and water supplies, and national politics? In each aspect of these decisions, the question of "who is my neighbor" invites us to be attentive to the benefits or repercussions, rather than simply passing by unaware or unconcerned.

But—you may protest—it's not all butterflies and picnics. There's more traumatic stuff. After all, Jesus chose to spotlight somebody who had been robbed and injured. And this week in particular we've had too many examples of tragic pain and loss, beginning with two more shootings and the shape of the most horrible edge in racial disparities, where it takes protesting to reiterate even that their lives matter. But then in sorrowful reversals, a wretched retribution, and the cycle of violence, we also have had to witness the attacks on police. It is shocking and awful and discouraging.

But even the fact that we are seeing it means something in the context of this story, that it fills us with emotion, that we are moved with compassion. That is a start. We see that neither black lives nor police in uniform can in these days be equated with the robbers in the Bible story, where those were just non-characters of the set-up, (though perhaps in the larger vision we'd see them also in need of care and redemption and healing). The point of the Bible story isn't in determining who the bad guys are. It is the question of recognizing neighbors in need, which in these days we can see both in police officers and in people of color faced with inequality. Jesus then asks us to see ourselves as neighbors who can help amid a desperate situation.

I'll tell you that on Friday morning I almost scrapped my original sermon to focus entirely on this, and you may or may not believe that would've been the right thing to do. But I don't believe preaching is just responding to current events, because, as important as this is, and as much as it's part of a bigger and terribly complex problem, we're also good at forgetting and moving on, only to be shocked and saddened by a next calamity. That makes us again into priests and Levites who pass-by rather than Good Samaritans. Neither is this Scripture text about one issue, no matter how important.

So I am continuing on, since we're also aware of so many other worries we encounter. We can find neighbors in those who suffer oppression (and have too often been met with our apathy), like the LGBT community after *last month's* shooting or the vulnerability of victims ensnared by human trafficking or families in bondage to poverty and the homeless we meet through The Road Home. It's in disaster situations like after flooding in West Virginia. Almost certainly we should be motivated on behalf of refugees too

easily tuned out as "not our problem" and ignored by those who officially should be helping, a precise modern parallel of the Bible story.

Speaking of modern examples, the setting of this Bible reading, this road from Jerusalem to Jericho, now has a wall running right down the middle of it. 30 foot tall concrete, cutting off this Palestinian route, a path used for centuries no longer accessible, allegedly for self-security of Israelis but in actuality severing families from each other and making life less livable. We can no longer pass by this apartheid wall without asking "who is my neighbor?"

And with the image of this same location, this same road, Martin Luther King called us to "develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness" * on a system-wide scale. Here are some of his words:

On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that the edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values (he continues) will look with righteous indignation [at capitalist systems that] take profits out with no concern for the social betterment and [will] say: "This is not just." [And] this business of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into veins of peoples normally humane cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love."

In the end, we're left with no excuse, no self-justification for failing in love and justice. It's no relief that we're not directly to blame nor because we didn't notice the suffering. This journey with Jesus along life's highway becomes all-encompassing. I realize seeing all this hurt and standing against hate is no small agenda, no easy task, no quick solution. But this is the can of

* p284 in *Testament of Hope*
p240-1 in *Testament of Hope*

worms that gets opened with the question, "who is my neighbor?" If we're honest, it's not a surprise. As described in the Deuteronomy reading, you couldn't argue; you know in your heart what's right. Love is not about your self-satisfaction to feel like you've done enough, but is an ever-expanding role. Though it's never perfect, never complete, never fully attainable, the Colossians reading nevertheless invites you into this calling of such enormous terms to "lead a life worthy and pleasing to our God in every way, [to] multiply good works of every sort and grow in the knowledge of God."

If you still think the lawyer's question was right to be asked, the only remaining word is this: "Go and do likewise."

Hymn: *Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us with Your Love* (ELW #708)