

A Man in a Ditch

Luke 10: 25-37

Last week's text had the question: "Who are We?" Answer: We like Mary are a people who sit and listen to Jesus. This week's text asks, "Who is My Neighbor?" And it ends with the charge: "Go Thou and Do Likewise." We sit and listen. We get up and do. The sermon is over. Please stand for the benediction.

I

No, not quite yet. Put your coats down. Today Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan in response to a scholar of the Bible, the Rev. Dr. I.B. Smart, B.A., M.Div., Ph.D., D.M.V.. He came to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Good question.

Jesus often answered a question with a question, so here: "How do you read the Torah on this?" The professor answered quoting two verses from the Torah: "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." I love the way Sue has rephrased this second part, "love them as you wish to be loved."

The Rev. Dr. has memorized his catechism, and Jesus says, “You’ve given the right answer. Do this and you will live.” Do this. The exam has two parts: knowing and doing.

But then, as Luke explains, this man wanting to “justify himself”, prove himself right with God, asked, “And who is my neighbor?” The thrust of the question, and I may be overly judgmental here, is “Who is the one I do not have to love as myself?” The one I need not love and still be good with God? What are the limits of my obligation?

You can’t love *everybody* as yourself! We can suffer what is called “compassion fatigue.” People’s needs are endless. But for some Christians that’s not their problem. Sue was shopping at Hobby Lobby recently and saw a Christian book for sale that decried what it called “Toxic Empathy.” “Toxic empathy?” If you help people too much, they will get lazy and dependent. “Welfare queens”, as one former President called such people. In a nation that has undergone an “empathectomy”, the surgical removal of our empathy, I don’t think “toxic empathy” is our problem.

“Define neighbor”, the good Reverend Dr. asked Jesus.

II

So now Jesus employs his other favorite way of answering a question: he told a story. A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. The Jericho Road was a dangerous route. It was a seventeen mile stretch that dropped 3,000 feet with narrow passes and blind gaps where robbers could hide in the shadows and attack. So it happened. As the story tells it, the man fell among robbers who beat him and robbed him and left him half dead.

You know the story almost too well. By chance, the text says, by chance a priest came by, took a quick look and passed by on the other side. On his way I guess to a Preachers Convention in Jerusalem. Then a Levite came by, glanced at the man bleeding on the road, and he too passed by on the other side. Levites at that time were in charge of music and worship in the temple in Jerusalem. Had to get there in time for choir rehearsal! So the preacher and the director of music are taken care of.

But then a Samaritan came by, one despised and excluded, a mixed-breed half-Jew with questionable moral credentials, and he—now the action slows down—*came near him*, always that first step in neighbor-love. And he *saw* him, the next step, and had “*compassion*” on him—that’s the word always associated with Jesus and God in Luke—and *went* to him and *bandaged his wounds* using his own oil and wine. And he *put* him on his donkey, and *carried* him to an inn where he *nursed* him through the night, and on the next morning *gave* the

innkeeper some cash and said, “Take care of his needs, and if you need more I’ll be back to pay what I owe.”

Think for a moment about the risk and costliness this Samaritan took upon himself. Stopping on a dangerous road, caring for the nameless visitor, carrying him to a Jewish inn. Imagine an immigrant today, documented or undocumented, seeing a person beaten and bloodied beside the road. He puts the man in his car and takes him to the city hospital. He could be arrested and deported.

Listen again to the verbs of compassion. Compassion is known by its verbs. The Samaritan comes near, sees, has compassion, stops, cleans, bandages, carries him, nurses, pays, promises to pay more if need be. In Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus ends, not as Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, “Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect”, but rather, “Be compassionate as your Father in heaven is compassionate.” Maybe that’s what “perfect” means to God, “compassion.”

III

After the story Jesus puts the question to the professor: “Which of the three proved himself a neighbor to the man who fell among robbers?” He changed the question’s angle: Not “who is my neighbor?” to “Who acted neighborly?” The man

answered, “Well, I guess the man who showed him mercy.” and Jesus did not say: “You got the right answer. A+”, he said, “Go and do”. Go thou and do likewise.”

So here we are with the question again, “Who is my neighbor?” As individuals, as a church?

We might say, “Whoever happens, chances, to cross our path today who needs help.” Any small gesture of kindness or help might change their life. Who knows?

We might here at Grace say: Look at the wall around the photographs and see all the helping ministries we support. Are there some new ones, new neighbors?

How about our children, our children here at church. *Our children are our nearest neighbors!* Our first neighbors. Professor of Christian Education at Duke Divinity School, John Westerhoff wrote extensively about the spiritual nurture of children in church. One book was called, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* He offers four essential elements for the nurture of our children in the faith:

1. That we tell and retell God’s story as found in our Scriptures until it becomes our common personal story.
2. That we participate in worship and Communion and other special services together.

3. That we listen and talk with each other about our experiences and relationship with God. And,
4. That we perform faithful acts of ministry together.

This evening at 5:30 we will have a potluck dinner together and discuss such things.

Who is our neighbor? How about those we know whose lives are being turned upside down by the un-Constitutional funding cuts to those in most need in our nation? And their teachers and caregivers.

What about our neighbors in our neighborhood? A lot of churches live in splendid isolation from neighborhoods where they sit. Our Grounds Committee is at work to make our large green space more beautiful and welcome to our neighbors. Tom is putting up shade sails over our playground. Our basketball court will be improved!

What about our *enemies*? In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus refuses to draw a line between neighbors and enemies. Now that's hard! "Love them, pray for them", he said. Even through gritted teeth we can pray for them. Jesus does not say we have no enemies, that God has no enemies. He says these too are not beyond the arc of God's love. The first rule of love is like the beginning of the Hippocratic Oath: "Do no harm." We do them no harm. Then we pray for them.

There is no place the love of God cannot go, as hard as that somedays is to believe. Show me the one who does not need love.

Nobody here is good enough to do this. That's why we are in church every Sunday, to ask for help from beyond us.

IV

Which leads to my conclusion. I have posed the two questions, "Who are we?" and "Who is my neighbor?" But perhaps we need to shift our place in the parable from the three characters, who did or did not help the man, to the man in the ditch. Are we ever that man?

When have you been helped when you had no place else to turn? When were you totally dependent on another or others? When, where have you called out for help? I remember in a dark period in my life when I stumbled into a psychiatrist's office and said words I had not planned to say. "I need someone to hold my life with me", I said.

Who has come to help when you were brave enough or in enough pain to ask? The church is the community of those who need help. The kingdom of God is the kingdom of the Sick, the Broken, the Guilty, the Confused, the Despairing. The kingdom of the Dispossessed and Despised, the Overlooked and the Pushed

Aside. The kingdom of those who love and of those who wish to be loved. The kingdom of Us!

And then, guess who the Samaritan is in the parable?

Who has come as a man of sorrows bearing our griefs, one despised and rejected with no place to lay his head?

Who has loved others even when they were persecuting him?

Who will care for us through the night and take responsibility for us and pay the debt?

Who has loved us recklessly, completely and even given his life for us?

Who was even accused of *being* a Samaritan?! And refused to answer the slur of a question?

The church is the place where we come to be loved and saved by Jesus in the ways we each need to be loved and saved.

Your head is on the ground as you lay on your side. You see a figure coming down the road. You have no strength even to cry out. He is a stranger. He takes you in his arms and takes you to that healing place where you most need to go.

Now is not the time to say, “Oh, I’m fine.” Let him come.

One more image of the church before I finish. Last week, a people who listen at Jesus' feet. Let's call it The Church as A House of Worship for All People. Today, a people who do the love of a neighbor. Let's call it the Church as Mission Outpost. And now this, The Church As God's Hotel. It comes from an extraordinary book about the last hospital in the U.S. devoted completely to the chronically ill and disabled, to patients no one else wanted, to the poor and to those who needed a long time to get better. The tradition of such hospitals arose in the Middle Ages and were called in France a *Hotel-Dieu*, a Hotel of God. These hospitals were also called "almshouses". They operated in concert with the hospitals which provided for acute care of patients. Think of the ministry of the Hospice House in Statesville.

The book *God's Hotel* was written by a remarkable physician, Victoria Sweet, who tells of her experiences working with patients and staff at Laguna Honda Hospital in San Francisco, which cared for over 1,000 patients and sat on 62 acres of beautiful land, the last almshouse in America. She arrived to stay for two months as part of her training and stayed 20 years. There was an old axiom about practicing medicine she discovered at work there: "The secret in the care of the patient is in caring for the patient."¹ That's the secret in neighbor-love too.

The Church is God's Hotel and we are the patients. It is where we go to deal with the chronic condition of being a human being! Here we "out" ourselves as

human beings and say, “I need help.” Here we try to love each other and those beyond us as we ourselves wish to be loved.

Perhaps Mr. Rogers knows best how to end this sermon:

Won’t you be,

Won’t you be,

Please won’t you be my neighbor?

In other words, Tell me how to love you.

Victoria Sweet, *God’s Hotel* (New York, Riverhead Books, 2012), 81.