

Psalm 133; Luke 10. 25-38

A Sermon Preached at the Larchmont Avenue Church

Homecoming Sunday

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## **Greeting Neighbors**

There is a young man – a lawyer -- who approaches Jesus with a question. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The man knows the answer to the question before he asks it.

Jesus knows that he knows the answer to the question. “What does the scripture say?” The man replies: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and strength and mind and you should love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus says: “You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.” But wanting to justify himself, the man asks: “And who is my neighbor?”

Then Jesus goes on to tell of a man walking down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho who fell among thieves. And with that, the story of the Good Samaritan unfolds . . .

But, it’s by “wanting to justify himself,” that the man presented his question . . .

Maybe it’s because we are beginning a new school year. Thinking ahead, we can consider all of the upcoming classroom experiences and papers to be written wherein students will be called on to justify, substantiate and back up their points, that that point stands out . . .

Maybe it’s the candidates and the political conventions, and the positions which have been and will be presented and justified and substantiated and validated. As if to say, “What I meant by that is . . .” Or, “what I really want you to know is.” Or “let me be perfectly clear about . . .”

Or maybe it’s because I never get to watch the Sunday morning broadcast of Meet the Press; as I am otherwise occupied at that time – and we are too. I miss those Meet the Press moments when public figures take pains to stake out their position, either hard on the attack or strong on the defense, to justify themselves --

So it is that the man’s effort stands out – as the Bible says -- to justify himself. And it leads to this unforgettable story. The parable of the Good Samaritan comes about in response to . . .

Who is my neighbor? That’s the question, the man gets it, finally. That is, after the question of “what must I do to inherit eternal life” gets dispensed with. Jesus hardly says a word about eternal life; it’s about life now . . . That’s where we find our hope for the future.

These past couple weeks, like many of you, watching the political party conventions, I have noted -- among many things -- the signs: hand-held placards, posters on sticks that have been waved wildly whenever anyone has spoken . . . thousands of signs with all sorts of messages. There have been mass-printed signs, finely stylized signs and hand made signs . . . and mass-printed signs made to look like hand made signs.

Signs that change whenever a different speaker steps up. You've seen them no doubt. [It turns out that there are dozens of young staffers – in both parties -- whose job it has been to collect and distribute, and collect again and distribute again.]

It made me think how readily able and adept we are at signs and labels and distinctions. To be sure, those convention signs were raves and cheers for the candidates.

But then there are those signs which brand and mark, those signs which impose a demeaning distinction, a criticized category.

The term “Samaritan” was like that. Jesus knew that as he told the story. The Samaritans were viewed as unclean, untouchable, anything but good. The Good Samaritan was an oxymoron. Imagine. Imagine it as a story of one who is despised because of differences and you get a sense of what Jesus was talking about.

The moral of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan is: That it's not what distinction of difference in people that matters; it is how they treat their neighbors – It is how they love.

Years ago, while I was a college chaplain, I helped a group of students establish a place for prayer at George Washington University. It was at the beginning of the Muslim Student Association at GW. That group now meets at the Presbyterian Church on campus.

I remember the surprise and gratitude of the Muslim students . . . that I would do such a thing. It was exceeded only by the surprise of the evangelical Christian students on campus who also were surprised – and shocked -- that I would do such a thing. Both groups assumed that as a Christian I would avoid any such encounter – much less help – anyone of different religious identity in their practice. I remember explaining myself, inviting them to a bible study on Jesus' story of the Samaritan . . . who helped his neighbor without asking him about his theology or belief.

[On a similar note] Years ago, in Chicago, 4<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian Church was the home for Chicago Sinai, a Jewish Congregation, which met at the church for an extended period of time, until their sanctuary in Hyde Park was completed. This was brought to my attention by a friend who knew that that is what we did here at LAC. When the Larchmont Avenue Temple was under renovation in 2001, Shabbat services were conducted in Russell Hall.

About that time, when Chicago Sinai moved into their own building, the pastor of 4<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian Church, Rev. John Buchanan – pastor at 4<sup>th</sup> Pres.-- preached at the dedication of the new synagogue. He “thanked the Jewish community for reminding Christians that faith is not merely a one way ticket to heaven, but a way to live in peace and harmony with all God's children. We are both messianic people. We believe God has a will and an intent for creation that is large and more glorious than anyone's particular religion and that is has everything . . . to do with reconciliation and peace and justice for which there is no lovelier word in any language than shalom.” Citing the great psalm which Rev. Julie Emery read earlier, “How good and pleasant it is when people live in unity,” Rev. Buchanan called the experience at the synagogue a “family reunion,” realizing one another as neighbor.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*, Riverhead Books, New York 1998, p. 356.

Who is my neighbor? May be the most important question we can ask, as a matter of life or death for us, and for our planet.

When the lawyer asked it, he wanted a legal definition which he could refer to in case the question of loving one ever happened to come up.

He presumably wanted something in the order of: "A neighbor (hereinafter referred to as the party of the first part) is to be construed as meaning a person of Jewish descent whose legal residence is within a radius of no more than three statute miles from one's own legal residence unless there is another person of Jewish descent (hereinafter to be referred to as the party of the second part) living closer to the party of the first part than one is oneself, in which case the party of the second part is to be construed as neighbor to the party of the first part and one is oneself relieved of all responsibility of any sort or kind whatsoever."<sup>2</sup>

Instead, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, the point of which is that your neighbor is anybody who needs you, and the neighbor we are called to be is the one who shows mercy. Loving God, loving your neighbor as yourself . . . Do this and you will live. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper and Row, 1973, p. 65.