

Who Is My Neighbor?

Luke 10.25-37

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A Sermon Preached at the Larchmont Avenue Church

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Two men I know – Steve and Eric -- were on a morning commuter train going into the city not too long ago. They got on board here in Larchmont. The night before it had been stormy: heavy rain, big winds. Some trees had been uprooted. Limbs had been ripped off and fallen. The two men couldn't help but talk about the storm and all of its destruction. Both had tree limbs and branches all over their yard. They were explicit about the damage. Eric described how one limb had crashed on his side yard fence.

Steve was amazed that the same thing happened at his house: a heavy branch came crashing down on the fence on *his* side yard. They both talked a bit more and discovered that they were in fact next-door neighbors! They shared the same fence, now broken! They had actually been living next door to each other for a couple of months without realizing that they were neighbors, right next to each other . . . .

In the Gospel lesson this Lord's Day, Jesus tells a familiar story which has – at its beginning – the question of “who is my neighbor?” The story is that of the Good Samaritan – a story which all of you know. Among the parables of Jesus, it's a feature story. It's “required reading” for Christians.

There is much to it, as we look at the characters and the course they take – literally – around a person in need. More on that in a moment.

But parable actually begins with an encounter, an encounter that is quite separate from the story. Jesus is approached in a way that appears to be aggressively inquisitive -- or inquisitively aggressive. It's a lawyer who confronts Jesus asking a question.

I am sure that Jesus being Jesus knows that the man knows the answer to the question which he is asking. This lawyer is well-versed in the religious law – he is likely a Pharisee or Sadducee, one of the learned Jews of his day. He undoubtedly knew the law. The law comes from the Torah, beginning with the Decalogue – or ten commandants, given by God –from Mount Sinai to Moses. From the commandments, the covenant law extends through the Books of Exodus and Leviticus and then into the Book of Deuteronomy (so named because it is the second book of law). [The Dueteronomic Code]. In its fullness, it is 600+ statutes: rules and laws which cover any of the questions which the lawyer – or anyone -- might come up with, regarding life and faith.

So, with this understanding, you might wonder: what is it that the lawyer would want to ask. This is by no means a Senator interrogating a would-be Supreme Court Justice, this is a well-versed teacher of the religious law questioning the One who comes as Messiah [son of god, son of man]. He asks: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

And then Jesus tells the story . . . of a traveler on the road to Jericho – down the route from Jerusalem, along the West Bank, going south. Rugged territory. The man is accosted and beaten by robbers and left for dead.

Eventuallu, a Samaritan eventually stops to help.

But first a priest and then a Levite pass by. Avoiding the man, averting their eyes. Refusing to stop, much less touch the person lying there.

The priest and the Levite are religious leaders, exemplars of the faith (not unlike the lawyer himself). They know the law, and the law emphasizes what is clean and unclean and the rules of the Sabbath – the codes and statutes of which were sufficient enough to establish grounds for, and rationalize the actions of, their utter avoidance of the broken body.

But they didn't even rationalize or argue on their own behalf. We don't hear any sense of their musings, much less anguish. They just very intentionally walk around the wounded man. Sure, in the years to come, the translators and interpreters and preachers of the story will make it a point of explaining why they might do that.

But not Jesus in his telling of the story – maybe because he expects that the lawyer will give all that rationalization. And maybe the lawyer expects that Jesus expects him to give that rationalization on behalf of the priest and Levite. So the lawyer just keeps quiet. Good move, counselor.

Backing up . . . Remember the lawyer's question was what must I do to inherit eternal life? To which Jesus asks him: "What does the law say?" The lawyer recites it all, including the law to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. "Fine," Jesus says, "Do this and you will live." But then, as the scripture says, "To justify himself." The lawyer asks "who is my neighbor."

It's then that we hear the story of the Good Samaritan from Jesus. The lawyer – the one who was listening for laws and statutes -- hears it too. And it's then that Jesus asks the question. That question: Who is the neighbor? The man answers: "The one who showed mercy." Jesus says: Go and do likewise. In response to a question of how to acquire eternal life, Jesus talks about caring, caring now, with your neighbor – the one who needs you.

And so we have the story of the Good Samaritan, as it's come to be known. Ironic: because Samaritans in the eyes of the religious and righteous of the day . . . Samaritans were viewed as anything but good – such was the prejudice against them. But Jesus cites the experience of Samaritan -- the one who was viewed as unclean; the Samaritan is seen as the model of righteousness. He does so in the face of the "righteous" ones – the ones who walk on by. It makes me think that the title for this story could very well be the parable of the "bad priest" or the "lousy minister."

I remember years ago someone calling me a “paid Christian.” It was a mostly respectful response. Mostly. It was in response to my presentation to a college group about a service project, enlisting support and volunteers. The comment was as if to say: “That’s your obligation . . . not necessarily ours.” Indeed, I realize that I have that identity – an association if you will – with the priest or Levite – as one called to serve, to live-out faith with care for neighbors . . . But we all do, and we are all neighbors.

Jesus tells the story to point out and show – especially to those whose love of the law took precedent over the law of God’s love – the nature of neighbor, and who the neighbor is – yours, mine -- is.

Beyond the priestly prescriptions and picky prejudices which steer us away. Apart from the sights from which we avert our eyes, because we don’t want to see, or simply need to hurry along, there is our neighbor . . .

Love the Lord your God with all you heart, soul and mind, strength . . . and your neighbor as yourself . . . Do this and you will live. Who is the neighbor? The one who showed mercy . . . Go and do likewise.

Amen.