

July 14, 2019
St. Simon's, Sandbridge, VA
5th Pentecost (RCL/C)
A sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

Earlier in my life I belonged to a group of young Christians who liked to challenge one another to state the essence of Christianity. Often the way we stated the challenge was to frame it in such a way that we were trying to tell a person from the planet Mars about Jesus Christ.

Our first approach to the mythical person from Mars was always to use the Bible tell our story.

It should come as little of a surprise to any of you that we would begin with this well known and often used verse from John's Gospel: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."¹

Then, once we'd convinced ourselves that we had made the opening point with our favorite Martian, we would move on to other favorite verses.

From the book of Philippians we would quote, "...at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."²

Also from the Gospel of John we would use this verse: "Jesus said... 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'"³

Finally, we would always explore this verse from Paul's letter to the Corinthians: "...if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"⁴

Often the Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics in our group would say that we needed to talk about the promises we made in our Baptismal vows. We Episcopalians were most fond of that late addition to our baptismal vows which is to protect the dignity of all God's people.

However, deep within each of us most of us knew we weren't hitting the mark of being effective communicators. We knew that something was missing; was askew. Yet, we didn't know quite what wasn't right.

¹ John 3:16, NRSV.

² Philippians 2:10-11, NRSV.

³ John 14:6, NSRV.

⁴ II Corinthians 5:17, NRSV.

Since those decades ago days of yesteryear the challenge has become even more pronounced. Today we don't have to go into the depths of the universe to find the person who knows nothing of God in Christ. You only have the look to your neighbors across the street. In reality we are at the point, not only our country but throughout the world, at which we have multiple generations of people who've never been told or learned about Jesus. Within the United States we are nearing the point at which those who have no faith affiliation or commitment whatsoever, whom we know as the "nones," will soon outnumber those of us who do have an active faith. We know that the neighbor across the street may not even have anyone in climbing distance on his or her family tree who is a follower of Christ.

Our real time commitment in this diocese to what is known as the Fresh Expressions of the Faith is very relevant to this communication challenge. We know that we must devise and live into some ways of engaging the neighbor across the street with an effective message of the importance of Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit.

Yet, how do we do it? How can we commit to walking that long distance across the street and effectively engaging our neighbors with the Gospel of Jesus Christ – as best we understand it.

In contrast to my earlier life experience I have come to believe that in our Gospel lesson for this Sunday, the Gospel lesson I just read, is a stunningly simple – not to be confused with simplistic – manner of telling the other about God's love and kindness for them, the love and kindness that was expressed by Jesus.

Let's revisit this story. An expert in the Jewish law went to Jesus and asked him what it would take to inherit eternal life. We need to understand right away that most likely this was not a simple and honest question. It was an attempt to trap Jesus into uttering some sort of heretical statement. Jesus' answer to the lawyer was what the scholar already knew from the Old Testament: love the Lord God with all your heart, mind, strength, and soul; and love your neighbor as yourself. Over time we have defined this as the summary of the law.

Then Jesus went on to illustrate his point by telling a story that has perhaps become the most cliched story in the entire Bible: the story of the Good Samaritan. A Jewish man, while traveling on a road between Jerusalem and Jericho, was attacked, robbed, and beaten by a group of thieves. Since in Jesus' day this was a relatively common experience, most people back then who heard this story would realize its gritty reality. The man who was robbed and beaten was left on the side of the road, presumably to die. Later another Jew, this time a leader of the temple came along, saw his beaten fellow Jew and chose to pass him by. Then another man, this time a member of the tribe of Jewish tribe of Levi came walking down the road. The Levite also glanced at the injured man and passed him by on the opposite side of the road. Finally, down the road came the Samaritan, a man from Samaria. Samaritans were not Jews and were much despised by the Jews. The reason for the dislike is a bit difficult to determine. It is like

asking why the Hatfields and McCoys had feuds in the mountains of Appalachia. Few if any knew why, but they did have feuds.

The Samaritan, in contrast to the other two travelers in Jesus' story stopped, gathered up the injured Jewish man and took him to a place where he could be cared for and heal. The Samaritan even went so far as to insure that he would be cared for even after he had departed on his way. Finally Jesus returned to the expert of the law who had asked him the question and asks him who was "neighbor" to the injured Jew. Of course, the lawyer identifies the Samaritan as the one who had cared for the neighbor. Jesus tells him to go and do likewise. At the end of Jesus' story the lawyer must have begun to realize that he, and not Jesus, was the one being put to the test. Indeed, did the Jewish lawyer have the capacity of such kindness?

The late author Kurt Vonnegut in his book A Man Without a Country recounted a heated conversation someone whom he identified only as Joe. Vonnegut was explaining why he thought the WWII British carpet bombing of the German city of Dresden was wrong. Joe challenged Vonnegut on this by saying that if the British bombing was the wrong thing to do, what precisely would have been the right thing to do. In other words, what are the rules that that should be followed by Americans and other citizens of the world? In the end, a frustrated Vonnegut said, "There's only one rule that I know of: (darn) ...it, Joe, you've got to be kind."⁵

In our busy and disconnected world, all too often kindness is conspicuously absent. In our society and culture it is all too easy to be driven by competition, greed and individualism. Today it seems that even those who are ethically minded often opt to be more concerned for rights than for forgiveness, for justice than for mercy, for equality than for compassion.

It would be easy for us to stop at this point and say that all we must do to inherit eternal life is enact some modicum of kindness, and forget about the business of loving the Lord God with all of our heart, mind, strength and soul. Jesus is beckoning us to live an authentic life that authentically loves God, and simultaneously is lived out in through caring for our neighbor.

Friends, this story of the Samaritan man who cared for the injured Jewish man is the story that the neighbor across the street should hear. This is the story of the love, care, and compassion that God has for all of us – and that includes the neighbor across the street.

However, before the neighbor will ever be able to hear our story, the story we tell with our lips, first that neighbor needs to know and experience our love. As difficult as at times it may be, we have to love the neighbor as ourselves. When we are able to connect in a relationship with a the neighbor, then and only then will the neighbor be poised to hear our words.

⁵ Kurt Vonnegut, A Man without a Country (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 107.

In just a few minutes we are all going to renew the vows that either were made for us or that we made at our baptisms. As we renew those vows I ask that you to remember that in and under those vows is the very basic foundation of loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself. On those two principles are all of our vows made. AMEN.