

Who is my Neighbor?

Preached on Trinity 13
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
Sept. 6, 2020

Many of us have probably heard the parable of the Good Samaritan numerous times. It is one of the most well-known stories of the bible. Even in our secular and increasingly post-Christian society, most people know its basic import. And its familiarity can take the edge off of it and give it that well-worn feel of moral reasonableness. There is a man who is attacked by robbers while traveling on the road toward Jericho. He is beaten and left on the side of the road half-dead. Two men walk by and ignore him. But the third one stops and helps him. Jesus tells us to be like that third man. End of story. Go and do likewise. It is part of our moral patrimony: we all affirm it and say that the Samaritan's act was "a nice thing to do."

But for Jesus' audience, this was quite a shocking story—which, of course, was Jesus' intention. He had a way of shocking folks through his parables that constantly flipped their social order upside down.

You see, it would have been one thing for Jesus to tell a story where the priest, the Levite, or even a devout man of the Jewish faith was the helper and hero. The Jewish faith was full of commands to help the wounded and save those who were dying. Of all people, the religious leaders would have been expected to do something to help a dying man on the side of the road, *especially* one who is a fellow Jew.

So for Jesus' audience, it would have been a bit unsettling to hear these two just walked on by. Still, it would have been understandable. Jesus' listeners also knew quite well what the road

from Jerusalem to Jericho was like. It was a notoriously dangerous road. Jerusalem is 2,300 feet above sea-level; the Dead Sea, near which Jericho stood, is 1,300 feet below sea-level. So, in somewhat less than 20 miles, this road dropped 3,600 feet. It was a road of narrow, rocky outcroppings and of sudden turnings, making it the happy hunting-ground of robbers. In the fifth century A.D., Jerome tells us that it was still called "The Red, or Bloody Way." In the 19th century it was still necessary to pay protection money to the local Sheiks before one could travel on it. As late as the early 1930's, many reports come to us of highwaymen who were adept at holding up cars and robbing travelers and tourists, escaping to the hills before the police could arrive. When Jesus told this story, he was describing the kind of thing that was constantly happening on the Jerusalem to Jericho road.

So, it would have been incredibly risky for anyone—Levite, priest, or layperson alike—to stop and help a person on the side of the road. The robbers could be hiding somewhere on the windy path, waiting for another person to attack. And what about the person lying on the side of the road? As was common, he could have been a decoy, feigning injury to lure someone to drop his guard and be overwhelmed. Most people would be very cautious in this situation.

Furthermore, if the victim were already dead, a priest would feel pressure to hasten past; for he who touched a dead body would be ritually unclean for seven days (Numbers 19:11). Hence, he would lose his turn of duty in the Temple; and many refused to risk that. Like many in the religious world, he chose ceremony over charity.

It sounds like the Levite might have lingered over the man a moment, but given that the robbers could still be lying in wait, he also considered it prudent to move on. He too chose safety

over the risk of helping the victim. If you or I found ourselves in this situation, we understandably might proceed to the other side of the road and move as quickly as we could to get to our final destination.

And in addition to all of this, whoever chose to help this dying man would have to interrupt their journey and use their own resources—if they had any—and go out of their way to get this person to a safe place where they could get the care they needed. And this would NOT have been easy. It's not like they could pull out their cell phone to call the police and an ambulance. There were no police or ambulance services. This is one of the big reasons people who had any sense traveled in large groups. If the Romans weren't around, you had to provide your own security. This is something we take for granted in our much safer country, with our nice roads, a generally law-abiding populace, and emergency services at the press of a few buttons. In contrast, travel for most of human history has been a risky affair.

So you see, it would have been *quite a lot to ask* for anyone at this time, devout or not, to help his kinsman in this circumstance, let alone someone you could fairly call your enemy. You would put yourself at risk in helping him. Is that a risk you really want to take? Therefore, before we too readily insert ourselves into the story as the hero, we need to consider the context.

We also must recall that though Samaritans and Jews shared historical roots, they had split centuries before over political, religious, and ethnic differences. And this centuries-old hostility toward one another was deeply engrained. They despised each other. They considered each other enemies. If the roles had been reversed, many Jews would have felt justified ignoring a wounded Samaritan on the road. It would certainly be quite a big deal for a devout Jewish man to help his enemy, who was considered ceremonially unclean, religiously heretical, ethnically inferior, and

a social outcast. In John 8:48 the Jews call Jesus a Samaritan. The name was sometimes used to describe a man who was a heretic and a breaker of the ceremonial law. Perhaps this man was a Samaritan in the sense of being one whom all orthodox good people despised. Yet, he alone was prepared to help. A heretic he may have been, but the love of God was in his heart. It is no new experience to find the orthodox more interested in dogmas than in help and to find the man the orthodox despise to be the one who shows compassion.

And so instead of making the Levite, or the priest, or another devout person of the faith the hero, Jesus makes the most disreputable person of all the hero. And this Samaritan man does not only stop to help the dying Jewish man on the side of the road. He truly *sees* him in all of his humanity, despite his bloody and unappealing state.

And in seeing all of this, the Samaritan man has *deep compassion* for the Jewish man on the side of the road. So he takes a dangerous risk, walks over to this man, and gives him first aid treatment. But he does not stop there. He puts the injured man on his animal, and travels however long it takes to get to the closest inn. And then the Samaritan *stays with him* at the inn for the entire night so he does not have to be alone after such a traumatic event. The next morning he pays the innkeeper whatever is needed to ensure this man is cared for.

So, who is my neighbor? The expert in the Law who asked Jesus this question was likely sincere. It is an important question. He had correctly answered his own question about how to inherit eternal life. Jesus asked him what was written in the law, and then said, "How do you read?" Strict orthodox Jews wore round their wrists little leather boxes called phylacteries, which contained certain passages such as "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all thy heart, soul, mind, and strength" (Deuteronomy 6:4 and Deuteronomy 11:13). So Jesus said to the lawyer, in

effect, "Look at the phylactery on your own wrist and it will answer your question." To that the scribes added Leviticus 19:18, which bids a man love his neighbor as himself.

But with their passion for definition, the Rabbis sought to define who a man's neighbor was; and at their worst and their narrowest, they confined the word "neighbor" to their fellow Jews. So perhaps the lawyer was asking Jesus about boundaries. In asking "who is my neighbor, the lawyer in our Gospel this morning was really asking who *isn't* my neighbor?

Well, Jesus' answer is plain and simple. Anyone can be our neighbor if they are in need and we are able to help. Your neighbor is the one in front of you whom you decide not to ignore. Even that person you consider to be your enemy. Even those whom our society deems as less important or less worthy. The doors to God's Kingdom are open for all.

In this Kingdom, Jesus calls us to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, and do such without first vetting them. Yes, we are sometimes in a position to determine if some alleged victim may be scamming us. But we need to be careful making blanket judgements about the general worthiness of those in need. How responsible have they been? Did they make good choices and meet misfortune anyway, or did they bring this on themselves? There are a lot of questions we can ask, which if pursued ruthlessly might disqualify most of the world from aid. Look at the victim on the Jericho Road. He was likely being foolhardy for traveling that road alone. Should we therefore ignore him because of his poor choice? If we pursue this line of reasoning, we set up ourselves as judges over weak, unwise, ignorant, often desperate, people who have to make a choice between several bad options. Part of being fortunate in this life is not having to make such choices. Those brought up well in relative security and affluence can often

avoid sub-optimal paths as a matter of course; or if they do choose unwisely, they have the resources to avoid the worst consequences.

We are therefore much better off helping those we can and leave the evaluation of peoples' culpability to God. Our job is to love God mightily and seek His will concerning anyone He places in our path. For to love God is to love those He has made. We are to love them as we love ourselves. In this current period of extreme tribalism, this message needs to be clear. Parsing the world into those worthy of our help and those worthy only of derision or erasure leads quite often in the direction of violence and even genocide. We've seen enough of that in the 20th century and more recently to avoid the naïve belief that humans have gotten all that out of their system. Our inhumanity to others rests comfortably within all of us and is easily roused.

But in this parable, Jesus pushes back against that all-to-human desire to heap contempt on an enemy and helps us to see the full humanity of someone looked down upon by society. This is not the direction His hearers wanted this story to go. They wanted someone else to be the hero of this story. To accept the Samaritan as a neighbor was to place him on equal footing with them. In Jesus' perspective, to recognize someone as a neighbor is to accept that he or she is the offspring of the same Father in heaven as you are. You are *both* created in the image of God and so deserve to be treated as valuable. Each of us is a beloved child of God, beautifully and wonderfully made and of great worth.

Jesus lays out here three things being a neighbor involves. First, a neighbor helps even if the person in need brought some of the trouble on himself, which is true of great swaths of humanity. Second, anyone of any nation whom we encounter is our neighbor. Our help must be as wide as the love of God. Third, the help must be practical and not consist in merely feeling

sorry. The priest and the Levite might have felt a pang of pity for the wounded man, but they did nothing. Compassion, to be real, must issue in deeds. And rest assured, these can come at great cost. But the Lord will strengthen us to be the neighbor someone needs as we put our trust in Him.

In the Name....