

And Who is My Neighbor?

Luke 10:25-37

CWZepp, BWCOB, November 12, 2017

A farm boy accidentally overturned the wagonload of wheat on the road. The farmer who lived nearby – always eager to be a good neighbor – came to investigate.

“Hey, Willis,” he called out, “forget your troubles for a while and come and have dinner with us. Then I’ll help you with the wagon.”

“That’s very nice of you,” Willis answered, “but I don’t think Dad would like me to.”

“Aw, come on, son!” the farmer insisted. “It’s getting late, you haven’t eaten, and our food’s on the table. You come get a good meal in you and we’ll both have more strength to right the wagon and clean up the mess.

“Well, okay,” the boy finally agreed, not wanting to offend by refusing the hospitality of his neighbor.

After a hearty dinner, Willis thanked the host. “I do feel a lot better now, but I still think Dad’s going to be real upset.”

“Don’t be silly!” said the neighbor. “We go way back, and he used to have dinner with us all the time when he was your age. Speaking of your dad, where is the old man tonight? What’s he up to that he left you to bring in the wagon all by yourself?”

Oh, I wasn’t by myself, replied Willis. “Dad’s under the wagon.”¹

Today, we are contemplating what it means to be a neighbor. Or perhaps it would be better to say what it means to be a “good” neighbor.

You may have noticed that our scripture today is the same that was the focus of our worship two weeks ago, when the Bridgewater College Church Travel Team led us in worship. When I heard about their chosen topic and scripture, I considered changing the focus of today’s worship, even though we had been planning to use the this theme – chosen and provided by our denominational office of Youth and Young Adult Ministries – for months. But after further reflection, I decided to move forward with it as planned.

It seems to me that this theme – this question of what it means to be a good neighbor – is something that is deeply resonant and compelling for the church today. It occurred to me that as of today, our congregation will have now heard a similar neighbor-based theme three times in the past half year. And does not seem without significance that these themes have all been brought to us by our young people – our children during Vacation Bible School this summer, our College Students two weeks ago, and our Jr. High youth today. It seems apparent that the question posed by the lawyer to Jesus in the parable of the Good Samaritan – “who is my neighbor?” – is a question that touches the depths of our current situation and culture. I might

¹ From “Don’t Drop In.” *Homiletics*. July 11, 2004. Online:
http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93000005

even go so far as to say it articulates one of the two or three central dilemmas for people of faith today.

It is widely reported that we live in supremely divisive and polarized times. I suspect that we have all felt this to some degree – whether our primary point of reference is the church or politics, international relations or race relations. Nevertheless, I do not subscribe to the belief that things are just getting worse and worse in this regard. Rather, I believe the tendency of human beings to organize ourselves into “us” and “them” categories is one of our oldest and most persistent challenges. It was scandalous and revolutionary when the apostle Paul wrote nearly two thousand years ago that, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”² It remains scandalous and revolutionary today. The categories may have changed, but the diagnosis remains the same. As does the prescription.

The lawyer in today’s scripture wanted to test Jesus. When Jesus redirected his question into test of the lawyer himself, he had all the right answers: Love God, and love your neighbor. “Exactly!” says Jesus – “Do this and you will live.”³ But this wasn’t enough for his examiner. He presses Jesus further: “And just who is my neighbor?” We are told that the reason he asks Jesus this second question is that he wanted “to justify himself.”⁴ The implicit intent seems to clearly be a desire to define the limits on who qualifies for such neighbor-love.

And as he so often does, Jesus’ answer comes in the form of a story – a story that breaks down the expectations and boundaries and identity politics of his culture. One of “them” is suddenly portrayed as the hero, as the representatives of “us” drop the proverbial ball. One of “those people” demonstrates the quality of neighbor-love that Jesus is advocating, the compassion that moves one to reach out and care for another.

It is hard to say anything more profound or compelling on the subject than the story Jesus tells. And so I want to share a few more stories that I have come across in my reading this week which echo the theme. The first comes from Judith Brain of Pilgrim United Church of Christ in Lexington, Massachusetts.⁵ She writes:

My son is a jazz musician. My husband and I went to hear his band one night, at a club in Roxbury. It was a warm, interracial, friendly spot.

At the table next to ours a big friendly African-American man attended to a tiny, twisted human being on a wheeled cart. A paralyzed man with a puppet’s body and large misshapen head lay on the cart, sipping his beer through a straw and watching the musicians attentively. He seemed alert, but only his eyes moved so it was hard to tell how much he really took in.

His friend captured our attention. He seemed alive to every nuance of this poor, deformed man. He leaned close to hear him speak in that noisy club and his manner proclaimed love.

² Galatians 3:28

³ Luke 10:28

⁴ Luke 10:29

⁵ From *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, July 9, 2001. Quoted in “Don’t Drop In.” *Homiletics*. Animating Illustrations. July 11, 2004. Online: http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustrations_for_installment.asp?installment_id=93000005

I thought about how wonderful this scene was. The club that embraced this broken person. I felt part of that embrace. I, too, was reaching out in some way with a friendly smile. “I accept you,” I was saying.

The room was smoky and my contact lenses gave me trouble. I popped them out, sloshed them in my water glass, and put them back. In a few minutes, the tall man came over to our table and gave me a bottle of eye drops. “Here, you need this.”

“Oh, thanks,” I gushed. “You noticed.”

“No, my friend did,” he said, pointing to the man on the cart. On that crooked face was a big grin.

He took pity on me. I came out of my arrogant pharisaical fog. “I accept you.” What presumption! I thought I was whole and he was not. I thought I was the giver and he was alien, the last person in the world who could help me. But the tables were turned. That twisted man in the jazz club became an unexpected source of kindness.⁶

The words of Jesus echo...go and do likewise.

The second story comes from the upper slopes of Mount Everest over ten years ago.⁷ On the morning of May 26, 2006, less than 1,000 feet from the summit, American guide Daniel Mazur abandoned his own climb toward the top of the world to save another climber who had been left for dead by his own team. Despite the fact that Mazur’s decision to aid the fallen mountaineer meant that none of his group, which included two paying clients (at \$60,000 each!), would make it to the summit, Mazur’s action spoke of who his neighbor was. The fallen climber was Australian Lincoln Hall, who had succumbed to the oxygen-poor altitude the previous night and become desperately ill. The two guides with him tried to help, but they eventually had to leave to save themselves. Hall was declared dead, but when Mazur and his team found him the next morning, he was sitting up, though disoriented. Mazur’s team gave him emergency assistance and set to work to bring him down the mountain. They also radioed for help, but by the time others arrived to take over the rescue, Mazur’s group had expended too much energy at that life-sapping altitude to complete their own summit bid.

While Mazur’s team was helping Hall, two Italian climbers passed by en route to the top, and Mazur asked them to assist. The pair claimed not to understand English and kept moving. That claim was later discovered not to be true.

Hall recovered from his near death on the mountain. But just 10 days before he was rescued, another climber, David Sharp, froze to death near the summit while 40 other mountaineers passed by without attempting to save him.⁸ And the words of Jesus echo...which of these was a neighbor to the men on the mountain?

⁶ Quoted in “Don’t Drop In.” *Homiletics*. Animating Illustrations. July 11, 2004. Online: http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustrations_for_installment.asp?installment_id=93000005

⁷ From “Adlet and Blink.” *Homiletics*. July 15, 2007. Online: http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93000347

⁸ http://journalofsacredwork.typepad.com/journal_of_sacred_work/2006/08/the_everest_of_.html

The final story comes from Canadian-American Jewish writer Saul Bellow, as related by Philosopher Christina Hoff Sommer:⁹

There was once a rabbi in a small Jewish village in Russia who vanished every Friday morning for several hours. The devoted villagers boasted that during these hours their rabbi ascended to heaven to talk with God. A skeptical newcomer determined to discover where the rabbi really went.

One Friday morning the newcomer hid near the rabbi's house, watched him rise, say his prayers and put on the clothes of a peasant. He saw him take an ax and go into the forest, chop down a tree and gather a large bundle of wood. Next the rabbi proceeded to a shack in the poorest section of the village in which lived an old woman and her sick son. He left them the wood which was enough for the week. The rabbi then quietly returned to his own house.

The story concludes that the newcomer stayed on in the village and became a disciple of the rabbi. And whenever he heard one of his fellow villagers say, "On Friday morning our rabbi ascends all the way to Heaven," the newcomer quietly added, "if not higher."

The words of Jesus echo...go and do likewise.

Whether on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho or the slopes of Mt. Everest, a club in Roxbury Massachusetts, a Habitat House in Dayton, or a tiny imaginary village in Russia; whether in ancient Palestine or 21st century Virginia, neighbors are found wherever compassion eclipses fear and self-interest, and common humanity surpasses identity boundaries. And as former US Senate Chaplain Richard Halverson has said, perhaps "the question is not "Who is my neighbor?" but "Am I a neighbor?"¹⁰ And in the end, that is probably the only question we really need to answer...

⁹ "Teaching the Virtues," *Imprimis*. 20 (November 1991). Quoted in "Who is the Good Samaritan?" *Homiletics*. Animating Illustrations. July 12, 1992. Online: http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=2658

¹⁰ From "Adlet and Blink." *Homiletics*. Animating Illustrations. July 15, 2007. Online: http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93000347 *Emphasis mine.*