

Who Is My Neighbor?

Amos 7:7-17; Luke 10:25-37

If one asked children about who is their neighbors, their answer is probably going to be those people who live next door to them. However, neighbors are not just those who live around us on our street. Instead, neighbors are anyone with whom we come in contact. How many of you have ever watched Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood? As I'm sure you know, Fred Rogers was a Presbyterian minister, who found in his ministry a need for people to have more acceptance and a better understanding of each other. As his TV program for children began, his purpose was to help give children a kind neighborhood to grow up in. As each program began, he would sing his song which ended with the invitation, "Won't you be my neighbor?" letting it be known that being neighbors has little to do with where we live.

This is one of the important lessons of the Gospel passage for today. The version of the Good Samaritan story you heard read this morning gives us a wholly different perspective on the story rather than one set in the first century and in cultures with which we are unfamiliar. This one sets the story here in the US and specifically in the deep South. There was rampant racism with huge religious and cultural divides in Jesus' day much like we find in our day-to-day living. His story was extremely personal for his listeners then and ours today is one about situations we can easily relate to. It sounds like an evening news story. "Preacher watches brutal attack and does nothing to help. Story at 11." It was as poignant for the people then as it is today for us.

This story is wrapped within the context of a conversation that Jesus was having with a "lawyer" of the day. Remember, law for the Jewish people was the Deuteronomic Code – laws found in the early Scriptures -Genesis through Deuteronomy – and their expanded explanations called the Talmud. So, lawyers were religious leaders versed in the Jewish laws and the details and his job was to instruct people on how those laws should be lived out – thus Clarence Jordan called him a Sunday School teacher. In this conversation, we are told that its purpose was so that the lawyer could trick Jesus and trip him up and thus, show him to be so clever. The whole conversation has a symmetrical quality to it. The lawyer asks a question to which Jesus responds with another question. The lawyer answers a question and Jesus, in turn, does the same. The lawyer asks yet another question and Jesus responds with the parable followed by a question for the lawyer. Then the lawyer answers the question and Jesus answers as well. While the questions and the answers are important, here we find Jesus making doubly clear that the Kingdom of God is not a discussion, even between religious leaders. Twice Jesus says to the lawyer "do what you know" (v. 28 and 37). It is not more information that the lawyer needed; rather it was action on his own understanding that he was in need of.

Luke uses the conversation to introduce the parable of unexpected choices. The characters chosen for this story are people that everyone would assume would be

people of compassion and action since their positions were as leaders in the faith community. If anyone would show love and compassion, it would be one of these people. Well, that was/is the assumption. Instead, this parable focuses not on both love of God and love of neighbor but rather on love of neighbor. And this is not an isolated instance of this focus. Paul writes twice that the entire law of God is summed up in the command to love one's neighbor as oneself. When the lawyer asks "Who is my neighbor?" following the parable, he is trying to limit the question to location or group in an effort to limit the extent of love to be offered. Jesus' question back to him corrected the question and required that he instead answer who proved himself to be a neighbor to the attacked man. This shifts the definition of neighbor from a group of people to how we act toward people. We are a neighbor to people is we act with kindness and compassion toward them, not because they are a member of a group or live in a particular place. There are not limits on the parameters of who we are to love.

Jesus knew where the "battle lines" were drawn among the people and used this story as a means to show God's great and expansive love. Using characters who were respected religious leaders showed the fallibility of all people, even religious leaders, even today, and specifically with us your pastors. Jesus showed to his listeners that all people are on an equal plain when it comes to making moral decisions. We all have to struggle with the opportunities and decisions that come our way. We hope that because our intent is to be of service to God, we will be inclined to make good decisions, but history proves that is not always the case. We hear way too often on the news of clergy and religious leaders who have been accused of crimes, sometimes horrific crimes. But the point is that all of us, no matter who we are, will find ourselves in situations where we will have to make decisions on how to respond...or not.

As we read through the stories, we find that the poor Samaritan, or in the case of the Southern version, the poor African American, these men were moved to pity and compassion. This is different from the religious leaders and how they perceived the situation. Both of them saw, noticed, and responded by moving away quickly on the other side of the road. They cannot later feign innocence by reason of now knowing. They noticed and moved away from the situation. Today, we would say they "didn't want to get involved because it didn't concern them." They saw the person as an object, not as a person, and the situation as an inconvenience instead of an opportunity to show God's love. The poor African American man was different. He saw the wounded man and not only felt pity, he was moved to pity, and proceeded to help him. The emotion of pity may well have been aroused in the hearts of the two men who passed by first, but they were not moved enough to act on it. They were not moved to pity. I believe it is Tolstoy who tells in one of his novels about a rich baroness who was so concerned for the plight of the poor that she cried and cried all night over the plight of a poor man all the while her carriage driver froze to death outside waiting with her carriage. Compassion first causes us to see a problem or situation for what it is, to see those who are weak and vulnerable and poor and outcast all around us, and then it moves us to

action, to show mercy with activity that changes things for them and for the greater situation - To work for justice.

It also shows no respect of cost. We readily write off, and excuse ourselves from responsibility to take action for things due to cost. Either it will cost money we have set aside for something more pleasant, or it will take money we don't yet have, or it will take time we aren't really willing to give. The person Jesus told us to emulate was one who was poor to begin with, who took great care of a person he didn't know, and then took the time to carry him to a place where he could be given the medical care he needed and he encumbered himself with the debt to pay for that care if the person couldn't pay for it for himself. He was willing to take on a debt for this stranger to assure that he would be cared for. This man showed that he was a true disciple by the care that he showed. He was the true neighbor.

How far will we go to be a neighbor to someone? How far will we go to assure that justice and mercy are available for all people?

It was this and closely related questions that God was asking of God's people in Amos' day that brought about the judgment and response we heard read earlier. During the long and peaceful reign of Jereboam II from 786-746 BC, Israel attained a height of territorial expansion and national prosperity never again reached. The military security and economic affluence which characterized this age, was taken by many Israelites as signs of God's special favor that they felt they deserved because of their extravagant support of the official temples. (Sound somewhat contemporary?)

Into this scene stepped the prophet Amos. A native of the small Judean village of Tekoa, Amos was called by God from a shepherd's job to the difficult mission of preaching harsh words in a smooth season. Given the message by God, he denounced Israel and its neighbors for their reliance upon military might, and for their grave injustice in dealing with social issues of the poor, immigrants, slaves and widows, for their abhorrent immorality, and for their shallow meaningless faith and piety. Amos' forceful, uncompromising preaching brought him into conflict with the religious authorities of the day. His personal confrontation with Amaziah that we heard read earlier is one of the unforgettable scenes of Hebrew prophecy.

Amaziah, priest to the King of Israel and High Priest of the land of Israel was angered that he was not given the message from God – and from his response and subsequent reporting of Amos' message to the King – shows that he had not noticed nor had the spiritual eyes to see what was happening under his jurisdiction. Instead, he hurled insults at Amos announcing the hearers that "This was no prophet" to which Amos responded by agreeing that he was only a shepherd and sycamore dresser from a neighboring country and began telling of his calling from God to come and deliver the harsh message. Amaziah proceeded to expel Amos from the royal sanctuary at Bethel and commanded him not to prophesy there again all the while paying no attention to the message that Amos had been charged by God to bring to the people.

God had set up a plumb line in order to judge Israel. Due to their turning away from the precepts and laws set up for them, their sinfulness, they were no longer the upright and true bearers of the Light of righteousness and God's judgement was coming for them soon. They were going to be overtaken and would become a people in exile in a foreign land. On the outside, they looked like a country that was doing fine. Prosperity and affluence abounded for some while many suffered in social injustice. Still, a casual glance would make one think all was well. It couldn't be THAT bad if they had all that prosperity, right?

I was working with Habitat at the time of Hurricane Katrina. Following it, Habitat for Humanity went in with a huge program of rebuilding the area of the lower Ninth Ward that had flooded out during the storm and its aftermath. Lots of lessons were learned there by all of us involved in construction. On the first study, it was thought that many of the houses still standing could be renovated and utilized again. But after more, in-depth research, in which plumb lines were used, it was discovered that many of the houses were leaning, not much and not enough to notice if you just quickly looked, but enough when plumb lines were used, to see that they had shifted too much on their foundations by the rush of the waters and the strength of the winds and were leaning heavily. Some, with much work, could be reinforced and strengthened but only a few. Many of the homes previously thought that could be renovated, ended up having to be demolished.

I'm terribly afraid that if Amos were to come visit today, that he would see our country in situations similar to Israel. He would also see that we as individuals are much like that. We look good on the outside, but compared to God's measurements, God's plumb line, how do we really measure up? When we become aware of problems, situations, injustice, are we moved with compassion to the point of action to help and assist neighbors in need wherever, however, whenever, whoever? God help us.