

SERMON 7-14-2019

We are always touched when we see a person do something for someone else. It gives both the giver and the recipient a good feeling. In fact, it's a wonder more of us don't perform numerous acts of kindness just so we can experience the good feeling it gives.

Of course, one of the world's best known acts of kindness is found in our Gospel reading. It's a story familiar to us all. It was a story that Jesus told about a man who was going from Jerusalem down to Jericho when he fell among thieves who robbed him, stripped him, beat him and left him for dead. Fortunately, the road was well traveled, so it wasn't long before a *priest* happened by. Unfortunately, the priest glimpsed at the broken, bleeding body lying there beside the road and crossed over to the other side. Charitably, let's assume he thought the man already dead. Priests, especially those on duty at the Temple, were strictly forbidden from coming in contact with a dead body for fear of ritual contamination. Likewise, a *Levite*, under the same prohibition as the priest, passed by on the other side. But there was a "certain Samaritan"—that is all we know about him—a certain Samaritan who, coming upon the man, had compassion on him. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring oil and wine to clean and soothe them, and he placed the beaten man on his animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day, when he needed to be moving on, this Samaritan went to the innkeeper, took money out of his own pocket and gave it to the innkeeper saying, "*Take care of this man, and if this isn't enough I will give you more when I return.*"

The story of the Good Samaritan is one of the most famous stories in all of literature. Jesus told this story in response to the question—"... *who is my neighbor?*"

Are illegal immigrants our neighbors? Are people starving in remote sections of our planet our neighbors? It's interesting. Luke tells us that the lawyer asked this question "*seeking to justify himself.*" We often ask the same thing—also *seeking to justify* ourselves.

That lawyer was astute—He did make the connection between loving God and loving others. Truly loving others brings you nearer to God, and truly loving God, perforce, brings others nearer to you. He has the theory right. No room for argument here. As followers of Jesus we know that the familiar, obvious answer to this question is, "Anybody who needs help is our neighbor." Or, maybe we can rephrase that "anyone who would help me."

I doubt that there is anyone here this morning who does not feel a twinge of guilt when re-hearing this story. We recall the hitch-hiker we left standing by the side of the road. We know the danger of picking up strangers, and yet it still bothers us to pass someone by. How about when we were stranded, and someone offered us a lift? There was that derelict who approached us on the street for a handout. "He would probably have spent it on whiskey," we say to ourselves as we pass him by, but deep in our hearts we wonder what Jesus would have done.

Obviously, we all may have our reasons “*to pass by*”, just as the priest and the Levite had theirs. You would think that being civil to one another is the very least we could do; every major religion or philosophy acknowledges that. Courtesy, compassion and kindness are the least of what ought to be expected of any human being; however, the teachings of Jesus instruct us to go beyond what the ordinary person might do. Jesus finishes the story by asking—“*Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?*” The expert in the law replied, “*The one who had mercy on him,*” namely, the Samaritan pariah!

We need to know that there are people who do go that extra mile, who care just a little bit more, even though totally unexpected. Those who would follow Jesus, however, are expected to do more: they are expected to show love and compassion to those whom others pass by. What is interesting is how we often sell-short what this parable is trying to convey—

Notice how the man who happens to be traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, is never given a clear description— Jesus simply says “*a certain man*”. He is not given a name, or a race, or ethnic attribution: just “*a certain man*”. Neither rich nor poor, Jew nor Gentile, religious nor irreligious, young nor old; neither a James, nor a Giovanni, nor a Boris.... Notice, too, that this is a *chance* happening: “*By chance, a certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho*” It could be any person, at any time. It could happen to you. It could happen to me. Then the person behind the parable... a fellow with a donkey comes by. He is a *Samaritan*— a good-for-nothing, mixed blood mongrel; one who denies much of Scripture, keeps his own heretical, sectarian beliefs, and makes blood sacrifices on Mt Gerizim, not Zion.

As Jesus told this story, I wonder how many good Jews in the crowd spat in the dust when Samaritan was mentioned. Yet, it is this despised character who comes to the aid of the victim, tends his wounds, places him on his donkey and delivers the poor fellow to a guesthouse, where he pays for his upkeep. At no point does the Samaritan stop to raise the legal question: “*Is this fellow my neighbor?*” Nor does he even consider insulating himself from the law by walking across to the other side to avoid possibility of running afoul. *Who do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell among robbers?* The lawyer’s reply was the only face-saving one under the circumstances—“*The one who showed him mercy.*” Jesus replied, “*Go and do likewise.*”

In the whole encounter, Jesus kept to the point of doing the necessary thing— the *right thing*—rather than trying to define the boundaries of love’s operation. In doing so he discards the theoretical question, “*But who is my neighbor?*” and applies the practical: “*To whom can I be a good neighbor.*” Who or what the other person is, does not in any way *define* the boundaries of loving. Race, gender, marital status, skin color, education, political preference, religious affiliation, age are all *irrelevant*. All that matters is that there is fellow human in need. The victim in the ditch, too, has to suck up his pride and gladly accept the loving care of that Samaritan! That’s what grace is all about—we are all neighbors doing a reciprocal favor for each other!

That's what stewardship and outreach are all about, too. We make ourselves available to others. Yes, it could be getting food to the hungry providing a place to stay for the homeless, raising money to dig wells or for starting-up commercially-viable flocks and herds; but it can also mean sharing first-hand knowledge or experience, freeing-up skilled workers to share their talents, or maybe just being there to pick up the leftover pieces. "They also serve who stand and wait."

Unless you're a recluse or hermit, we all have "neighbors"— someone who can use our help. In turn, like the traveler in the ditch, you never refuse help, no matter who offers it.