

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 8th Sunday After Pentecost, July 10, 2016

Who is My Neighbor?
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys
July 10, 2016

Deuteronomy 30:9-14 Luke 10:25-37

I am a Lectionary preacher, at least most of the time. I generally base my sermons on the suggested scripture readings for the day in what is known as the Revised Common Lectionary. Ordinarily the Lectionary suggests a Psalm, and Old Testament lesson, an Epistle lesson, and a Gospel reading. The preacher can choose any or all of the texts upon which to base a sermon.

Today I have chosen the Lectionary Gospel reading, Luke 10:25-37 plus Deuteronomy 30:9-14 which is not one of the suggested readings.

The reading from Luke is one of the most familiar passages in the Bible, the story of the Good Samaritan. The reading from Deuteronomy is far less familiar but the two readings are related. Both passages deal with following God's law --- obeying the commandments, specifically to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Eugene Peterson ⁽¹⁾ rephrases our reading from Deuteronomy saying, in part, *"God will start ... making things go well for you just as he enjoyed doing it for your ancestors but only if you listen obediently to God, your God, and keep the commandments ... you must return to God, your God, totally heart and soul, holding nothing back ... The word is right here and now --- as near as the tongue in your mouth, as near as the heart in your chest. Just do it!"*

This is saying that you must love God and love your neighbor, but is that what the lawyer, the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan did in our reading from Luke?

The lawyer asked what he could do to inherit eternal life. This was a common question asked in rabbinic discussions. It also appears in David 12:2 and it appears frequently in Jewish literature.

Jesus doesn't answer the question but instead asks the lawyer what is written in the Mosaic Law, the Law of the Torah. The lawyer responds that you must love God and your neighbor and Jesus tells him that if he does that he will have eternal life.

The lawyer isn't satisfied with that response and asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responds as he was wont to do with a parable, the very familiar story of the Good Samaritan.

The lawyer obviously doesn't consider everyone to be his neighbor. He wants to pick and choose just as most of us pick and choose. Is the beggar we pass on the street our neighbor? What about the homeless person sleeping in the doorway of a store at night? What about the young minority teenagers wearing hoodies and blocking a part of the sidewalk? What about the stranger who knocks on our door? Are those people our neighbors or is it limited to those people who live on our street, attend church with us, or belong to the same clubs and community organizations as we do? Jesus answers those questions with his parable.

To fully understand the parable, picture the scene. It was on the road from Jerusalem down to Jericho, a notoriously dangerous road which descended 3600 feet from Jerusalem to where Jericho was located on the Dead Sea. It was a narrow rocky road which was frequented by bandits. It was a road that no one should walk on alone, yet people did. The traveler learned the hard way how dangerous the road was. He was accosted, robbed, beaten and left for dead.

So what happened? The priest saw him and hastened past. He likely thought that the man was dead and remembered the admonition in Numbers 19:11 not to touch a dead man. To do so would render the priest unclean for seven days and to touch the corpse would cause him to lose his job at the Temple for a week. He wouldn't risk that. He wouldn't even risk seeing if the man was still alive. The Temple was more important to him than the life someone he didn't know. The traveler was not his neighbor, so he walked on.

The Levite likewise passed by without trying to help. According to William Barclay ⁽²⁾ bandits were in the habit of using decoys. One of their group would pretend to be injured and when a passerby came to offer help, the others would rush out and overpower him. That could well have been what had happened to the traveler. No stranger was worth taking a risk like that and the Levite was unwilling to take such a risk. The traveler was not his neighbor, so he walked on.

The Samaritan however knew who his neighbor was. Those who may have overheard Jesus tell the parable might have expected Jesus to identify the Samaritan

as the villain of the story. After all Samaritans were not to be trusted. They were despised. Samaritans were considered to be heretics and breakers of the Law. Samaritans certainly were not their neighbors --- yet the Samaritan was the one who offered help. The injured man was his neighbor, even though he had never seen him before and did not know him.

The lawyer was a scribe, a strictly orthodox Jew. He most likely wore a phylactery, a little leather box on his wrist or forehead, containing passages of scripture including the command to love God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and to love your neighbor (Leviticus 19:18). The lawyer was carrying the answer to his own question but didn't interpret the scripture as Jesus did.

In all probability the priest and the Levite had pity on the injured traveler but pity is not love. Only the Samaritan showed true love.

The devotional booklet These Days (February 22, 2015) said, *"The lawyer's question, 'Who is my neighbor?' reveals his desire to control and limit his discipleship. He wants to love person x but not person y. Jesus, however, subtly reframes the lawyer's question: 'Who is my neighbor?' becomes 'Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"*

"Jesus' invitation to become a neighbor reminds us that love seeks out who needs compassion and care. Jesus' promise is that even though our compassion is but a dim reflection of the compassion of God, when we love in this way, we experience life that is eternal."

It is not enough to feel compassion or to pray for those who are in need. Being a good neighbor is reaching out to them and giving them help. That is what the Good Samaritan did. As Jesus said, "Go and do likewise." Then and only then will you be deserving of God's grace.

Amen.

1. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2002
2. William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke, rev. ed., Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975.