



"Who is My Neighbor?"

Luke 10:25-37

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June 3, 2007

Day of Pentecost

He asked a question – a good question, perhaps the ultimate question. But his question wasn't an honest attempt to enter into dialogue, start a conversation, seek an opinion or, perhaps, learn something. He was a religious rival and his question aimed at getting Jesus to say something the man could use against him.

"Teacher," he said, "what can I do to inherit eternal life?" I need to point out that the term "eternal life" did not mean then what it usually means now. Eternal life did not refer primarily to life in heaven or life after death. It included that but much more. It meant life now with the quality of eternity in it. The man wanted to know the route to the good life, life with the best God has to offer. How can a person experience the kingdom of God right here and now? "Jesus," he asked, "what's your view?"

Jesus did not take the bait. He responded with a question of his own. "You're an expert in matters of religion. What does Scripture say? How do you read our Law?"

The man's reply was no surprise. He said what nearly every religious person of his culture would reply. He and his contemporaries said it three times a day in their prayers; every synagogue service then and now begins with it. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind" (Deuteronomy 6:5).

At the very center of biblical faith lies the call to enter into a relationship with our creator. God wants our love and trust. God wants us to entrust our entire life into God's keeping. God wants to live in partnership with us as our heavenly parent and the Lord of our lives. Christians call that relationship faith, trusting God with everything including our life and destiny. We place our life and our trust in God revealed in Jesus Christ. Jews emphasize the obedience required by such a relationship. Trust and obedience are two sides of the same coin called "faith."

The man continued and added the second half of what we call The Great Command. That part of the Great Command is a quotation from Leviticus 19. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Neighbor love flows out of love for God. God created my neighbor and God loves my neighbor. So should I. Even if my neighbor doesn't deserve my love, doesn't love me, fails to treat me right? Well yes, none of us deserve God's love yet God loves us all.

The Great Command, the way to the good life promised by God, is to have the moral courage to live in service to the interests of God and others. Such a life of self-sacrificing service is what it means to be a follower of Jesus. "If you want to be my disciple," Jesus taught, "deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me."

“Good answer,” Jesus said. “Do this and you will experience the good life promised by God.”

The religious expert wasn't put off so easily. He still was spoiling for a philosophical fight. “But,” the theologian said, “Who is my neighbor?” Where do you draw the boundary between one's neighbors and the rest of the world? How broad is the obligation to love?

Surely there's a loophole in the command to love others. Certainly there are boundaries beyond which our concern need not cross. The man was looking for an excuse to limit love of neighbor by limiting who his neighbors might be.

We join him. It seems most of humanity feels the need to build such walls. We belong to groups that have elaborate codes that inform us whom to honor and whom to despise, to whom to extend our mercy, and from whom to withhold it. Every human grouping has other groups it feels superior to – even despises.

Our primary commitment is to our kind, our kin, our country. That's natural, of course, but too easily such loyalty turns into disrespect of others, and even fear and loathing of people who are unlike us.

That's not new. In Jesus' time, some religious leaders taught that love of neighbor extended only to fellow Israelites. All others could be despised, even hated. Most contemporary Christianity is not so blatant, but often on board with the sentiment.

I heard a prominent Fundamentalist leader blasting away at his religious enemies. After the talk someone asked him about the Great Command. “How is what you say loving your neighbor?”

“Well,” the leader replied, “I do love them, but I don't have to like them.” That's quite an interesting (and lame) loophole, don't you think?

On the other hand, I recently attended a seminar led by a prominent theologian of the religious left. During his remarks he referred to all conservative forms of Christianity. With clenched teeth and fire in his eyes, he declared, “They are the enemy.” He seemed willing to extend his love to everyone on earth except Christians with whom he disagreed. That one is an ironic loophole.

Jesus' interlocutor wanted to evade the command to love his neighbor by carefully defining the word neighbor, hoping to draw a boundary restricting the obligation to love. We all do it, don't we?

Jesus refused to take the bait and enter an interminable argument about the definition of the word “neighbor.” Instead he told a story.

“A certain man,” he began. All Jesus' listeners immediately thought of a man like them, a fellow Israelite, a certain neighbor. This man was on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho on the Jericho Road.

Immediately, Jesus' hearer's ears perked up. The Jericho Road is a dangerous road. It winds 17 miles down through steep and craggy hills filled with ravines, caves, and hideouts. The road was legendary for bands of bandits who preyed on passersby. That's why most people traveled in caravans when possible. This man was on a dangerous trek.

Sure enough, he was attacked by bandits who beat him severely, stripped him, and stole everything he had including his clothes. They left him on the side of the road to die.

Before long, a priest came down the road. For some reason we don't know, he looked at the dying man and decided to avoid getting involved. He passed by on the other side of the road, acting as if the wounded man did not exist.

Then a Levite, a member of the minor clergy in Jerusalem, made his way down the road. He, too, for no known reason, took a look at the man by the side of the road and decided to keep his distance. He passed by on the other side of the road.

Now, if you are one of Jesus' listeners, you might hear a theme developing. It sounds like an anti-clerical story, and you knew what was coming next. You would expect the next person coming down the road to an ordinary layman like yourself. And he would not pass by on the other side of the road!

But to your surprise Jesus said, "then a Samaritan passed by." That's odd. He doesn't belong in the story. Samaritans were a despised sect of half-breed heretics who lived in their own land and kept to themselves. Jews and Samaritans kept a hostile distance from each other.

The closest cultural/racial/national hostility in our world would be Palestinians and Jews, Croats and Serbs, Sunnis and Shiia, Fundamentalists and gays. This man was the enemy, a man to be feared and loathed.

Certainly this despised stranger will join the priest and the Levite on the other side of the road.

We cannot imagine the shock imposed by the next sentence in the story. The Samaritan saw the dying man in the ditch, and he had compassion for him. He stopped, went over to the wounded man, and poured wine into his wounds – an ancient antiseptic – and then applied oil to those wounds, an unguent to promote healing. He bandaged the man, placed him on his donkey, and took him to the nearest Inn. He gave the Innkeeper two days pay to care for the man and promised that he would come back and pay any more money necessary.

"Now," Jesus said to his questioner, "who was neighbor to the man in the ditch?" The questioner's lips could not form the word "Samaritan" and he replied, "The one who had mercy."

With one simple story Jesus smashed all the familiar boundaries we build to protect ourselves from the cost of loving others. To be a person of faith, according to Jesus, is love our neighbors without boundaries. Christian mercy has no limits, national, racial, religious or otherwise. The Christian community is not and cannot be defined by the common categories by which humans categorize others and move them to the margins of concern.

A central quality of the Kingdom of God is just such unboundaried compassion. To do otherwise is to act unjustly because we restrict the very mercy God intends for every person in need.

For the Christian, the Christian community, our kind are not more important than any other kind. The only issue for us is opportunity. The Samaritan was offered an opportunity to act in mercy. Against all cultural instinct and training, he used that opportunity to do the work of God on earth.

Whenever an opportunity for mercy opens to us, our first response should be to give mercy. All boundaries must disappear before every opportunity. God calls us to do what God would do in every situation.

The Mission School of Hope is just such an opportunity. Two years ago, Rev. Charles Sagay told us about that school in Cameroon and its special outreach to the Pygmy people of the jungle. For some reason, I would imagine that it's the heart of God beating among us, that opportunity quickly became action, especially in our children's ministry and we did something. Today Charles came back to us to tell us the good work our mercy and compassion have done for some of the poorest of the poor on earth.

But Jesus is not finished with his questioner – or with us! “Go and do likewise,” he said to the man and now to us. The mercy of God and our mercy is not a matter of theological or political debate. It is a matter of action in the face of opportunity.

Being a Christian is not getting a 4.0 in Christian studies. It's not mastering the theological propositions of our particular Christian tradition; it's not writing the best confirmation paper of all time; and it's certainly not belonging to the right church.

Being a Christian is living with a life entrusted to God, and acting in love and mercy on God's behalf in the world. That's what makes a Christian.

Philip Yancey, a Christian writer, lives in Chicago. Recently, he was taking a bus to an appointment. The bus driver was an African-American woman. The neighborhood was mostly white.

An elderly white woman got on the bus and fumbled with her bus pass. She couldn't figure out how to use it in the machine in the front of the bus. The bus driver carefully and patiently explained to her how to run the card through the slot. “Here is how it works, honey,” she said. Finally she managed to get the card to work. Meanwhile, some of the passengers were getting a bit antsy and mumbling about wasting time.

Before the bus continued on its route, the elderly woman stopped and asked the driver why the machine beeped twice. She wondered if it took two fares off her card. Again the bus driver took the time patiently explain how the card worked and showed the woman that it took only one fare. “See honey, it only took one fare.” Now the rest of the passengers were really mumbling among themselves. The elderly woman finally found a seat and sat down.

A few stops later Yancey got off the bus. He turned to the driver and thanked her for her kindness to the elderly woman. “You made my day,” he said.

“Oh, honey,” the driver replied, “I'm just doing my job.”

That's it. Giving mercy wherever it is needed, that's our job.

Amen.

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