

Sermon: Are we good neighbours?

Our Gospel reading this morning hinges on a key question: “Who is my neighbour?” Like the lawyer in this story, we all know that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. But that is a mighty vague command. There is no way that I can love everyone in this whole world equally. So, once again I ask, who is my neighbour?

Being a Good Samaritan involves a certain amount of risk. We must ask ourselves, are we required to be a Good Samaritan to everyone? Where do we draw the line? Who, after all, is our neighbour?

The lawyer’s question is a good one that we all wrestle with. But instead of giving us a straightforward answer Jesus tells us a parable to help us wrestle with the issue.

So, let’s take a closer look at this story.

The road from Jericho to Jerusalem was a notoriously unsafe road. In 17 miles, the road climbs 3,000 feet through steep and rocky terrain. It was a perfect place for brigands to assault and rob travelers. Consequently, most people travelled in groups. This man, however, risked the journey by himself and paid the consequences. It would be as though someone ventured into a bad neighborhood at night all by himself. Something bad was bound to happen.

After he is mugged two other travelers pass by: one a priest, the other a Levite. We often have the tendency to paint these two religious officials as “bad” people. If the Samaritan is “good,” we reason, then these folks must be “bad.” The parable itself offers no moral judgement of any of the characters in the story.

If anything, Jesus chose these two characters precisely because they were good people. We are not meant to judge them, at least initially, but to identify with them. We have more in common with the priest and the Levite than we care to admit.

I'm sure that the priest and the Levite had very good reasons for passing by. Think of all the excuses that they could have used:

1. "I'm only one person; the job is too big."
2. "Someone else will be along soon."
3. "This road is too dangerous for me to stop and help the man."
4. "I've got to get home and see my family."
5. "It's probably his own fault. He shouldn't have been travelling through such dangerous territory on his own."

It's always easier to blame the victim than it is to help them, but that's the way it is with human nature. If something bad happens, it must be your own fault.

And yet you should notice that the priest and the Levite were also travelling by themselves; the same thing could have happened to them. If they had been mugged, I doubt that their first thought would have been, "It's my own fault." They would have blamed the robbers, and not themselves. That's the way it is with us, however. What we condemn in others, we excuse in ourselves.

There is one other reason that the priest and Levite passed by. They had no emotional or social connection to this victim. Suppose these two travelers had recognized the victim as a priest or a Levite.

Suppose they recognized the victim as someone who lived next door to them in their hometown, or as a distant relative from their

family. Do you think they would have stopped then? Of course they would! There would have been a connection that obligated them to offer aid.

But the traveler had been stripped of all his clothes and so was totally anonymous to them. You can tell a lot by what someone is wearing. This person had no clothes, and so he was totally anonymous. They had no clue about who he was. For all they knew he could have been a tax collector or a Roman and so they felt under no obligation to render help.

You see, two things kept the priest and Levite from stopping—their own fear and his anonymity. When you have no emotional connection to a victim it is very easy to let your fears take over and keep you from acting.

As Jesus continued with his parable, he introduced a third character—the Samaritan. Now the Jews really hated Samaritans. So, for Jesus to put a Samaritan in the story would have been absolutely shocking. Since Jesus has talked about two high status religious leaders who failed, the audience would have anticipated hearing about a layman who got it right.

But instead of a modest lay person Jesus introduces a despicable Samaritan. Just the mention of the Samaritan would have been a shock and a slap in the face.

Let's compare the response of the priest and the Levite to that of the Samaritan. Both the priest and the Levite saw the man, but their seeing is a superficial seeing. They see him with the mind but not with the heart.

They make a rational choice based on a perceived threat. They avert their eyes and pass by on the other side of the road.

The first thing we notice is that the Samaritan came near to him. The priest and the Levite apparently perceived the man from a distance. They never got close enough to make a good evaluation of the man's identity or his needs.

The Samaritan comes near before he "sees" the man. Now that doesn't mean that Samaritan didn't see him from a distance. I'm sure that when he was twenty or thirty feet away, the Samaritan saw this man lying in the road. But instead of keeping his distance, he came near to the man. He walked up to him, knelt beside him and looked at him deeply.

And there is an important lesson here: To see someone, you must come near to them. If you hold people at arm's length, you will never see them the way that Jesus sees them.

The second thing that we notice about the Samaritan is that when he saw the wounded man, he was moved with pity. The priest and Levite seemingly felt nothing except perhaps fear and disgust. They did a cold risk assessment of the situation and decided that it was too dangerous or inconvenient for them to do anything.

The Samaritan however had a instinctive reaction; his gut was stirred to compassion. If we want to follow Jesus, we need to have compassion.

The third thing we notice is that Samaritan put his compassion into action. He bound up the man's wounds, put him on his donkey and put him up in an inn. He gave the innkeeper the equivalent of 2 full

days of wages which should have been enough to get him lodging for a couple of weeks. He did all of this at great personal sacrifice for himself.

At the beginning of this story the lawyer and all of us along with him asked Jesus “Who is my neighbor?”

Jesus could answer, “Everyone is your neighbour, but instead he tells a story that encourages us to shift our focus from the fence to the neighbor on the other side. When our eyes are focused on the fence, we cannot see our neighbor clearly. However, when we look at the neighbor, we will hardly notice the fence.

We would all like to have some hard fast rule that guides us in how we respond to those in need. We want to care about those who are inside our fences and exclude those who are outside. This parable tells to look past the fences and just see the neighbour.

But doesn't that leave us in danger of being played and used? I suppose that it does. So let me offer three practical guidelines to help us live like Good Samaritans.

- Develop a predisposition to show compassion. That was the distinguishing characteristic of the Samaritan So don't make rules about who you will help and who you won't. Don't predetermine who is worthy and who isn't. Instead, ask God to give you a soft heart to see those who are in need.
- Ask Jesus to show you who you should help. We are not in charge of our own lives, Jesus is. If God sends someone your way who needs help, then listen to God and respond with a generous heart. You can't decide ahead of time whom you will help but you can trust God to show you when it is time to help.

You should always be praying, show me, God, who needs my help and give me wisdom to find the best way to help them.

- Don't erect fences, look over the fences to see your neighbor.

Amen