The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

July 14, 2019

***“Frenemies”***

Psalm 25:1-10 ~ Colossians 1:1-14 ~ Luke 10:25-37

Even people whose mama never took them to church know Jesus’ parable of "The Good Samaritan." They may not remember the setting, how a lawyer … well, he was really a scribe, a specialist in holy law … asked Jesus which law was the greatest law of all God’s laws. Jesus gave him that five second sermon we heard a couple of weeks ago: "Love God totally; and your neighbor as yourself."

You wouldn’t think it needed any explication, but the lawyer, startled by the obvious simplicity of Jesus’ answer, tried to make it seem more complicated with one of those "yes, but" questions that scholars just love. "Yes, but - *who* is my neighbor?" Then again, this is a typical dodge that all of us make when we don’t want to live by what the Bible actually says. We defer responsibility and delay action by raising confusing questions … appearing to seek clarity when we’re actually trying to obfuscate and complicate and, well, muddy up the waters! It’s always easier to debate what the Bible means than to live by what it says. "Yes, but … who is my neighbor?" asked the lawyer … stroking his beard … scratching his head … gesturing with the stem of his pipe. He wanted a legal definition he could refer to in case the question of loving one ever happened to come up.

He presumably wanted something on the order of: "A neighbor (hereinafter referred to as the party of the first part) is to be construed as meaning a person of Jewish descent whose legal residence is within a radius of no more than three statute miles from one's own legal residence unless there is another person of Jewish descent (hereinafter to be referred to as the party of the second part) living closer to the party of the first part than one is oneself, in which case the party of the second part is to be construed as neighbor to the party of the first part oneself is relieved of all responsibility of any sort or kind whatsoever."

That’s when Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan.

A man traveling to Jericho fell among thieves who left him bruised and broken and barely breathing in the middle of the road. First a priest and then a Levite (one of the Temple worship workers) came upon him, but they passed by on the other side. Jesus doesn’t say why. Maybe they were rushing on to other business. Maybe they were afraid it was some kind of set-up. Maybe they were concerned that they might be made ritually impure by contact with the dead and not be allowed to perform their rare, occasional, and privileged service in the Temple.

A priest and a Levite! The two people of *all* people that we would expect to stop and render aid. But no, they just mumbled "Somebody ought to do something," and walked by on the other side. Jesus’ audience might have thought, "Well, yeah, we know what those priests and Levites are *really* like."

Then came a Samaritan, a card-carrying member of the hated race of spiritual half-breeds from up north that Jesus’ audience were all reared to despise. They knew what to expect from a Samaritan. They expected the Samaritan to kick the wounded man and rifle his pockets to see if there was anything left to steal … but no. The Samaritan thought to himself, "Somebody ought to do something," and heard an answer back, "Well, you’re somebody." So, without fanfare, the Samaritan stopped, put the man on his donkey and carried him to the next inn to get help.

Jesus told this story, and then turned the lawyer’s question around as if to say that this is the question he should really ask … the question we all really ought to ask: *"Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"* The lawyer said, *"Well, uh…, the one who actually did something?"* Jesus said, *"Go and do likewise"* (Luke 10:36-37). It’s as simple as that. The neighbor we are supposed to love is *anybody* who needs our help.

G.K. Chesterton is probably best known to most people as the writer of the “Father Brown” mysteries.  They are about an English Catholic priest who solves murders.  The stories have frequently been made into television programs on the BBC … I enjoy them on PBS.  Chesterton was also a devoted Christian. He once said, “In one place Jesus tells us to love our neighbor.  In another he tells us to love our enemies.  This is because, generally speaking, they are the same people.”

Our enemies and our neighbors are be the same people? Well, according to Jewish New Testament scholar Amy Jill-Levine, “. . . in Hebrew, the words “neighbor” . . . and “enemy/evil-one” . . . share the same consonants, they differ only in vowels, which are not included in the text.  When Jesus asks the lawyer, “What do you read there?” he is asking “Are you able to see, in Torah’s words, the command to love both neighbor . . . and those you would see as enemies?”

And when the lawyer said, “Who is my neighbor?” he did more than simply try to justify himself … he revealed that he didn’t get the “enemy” part of the equation.  What he wanted to know was this: “Who is the person (or persons) whom I can reasonably be expected to help when they are in trouble?” Jesus answered him with a story that turns that question on its head. Jesus told him: “Your neighbor is exactly the opposite of who you think it is. The one you think is your enemy is really your friend.”

Just like Jesus’ audience, when we hear a story, we usually “identify” with someone in it.  We say to ourselves, “Yes, I’m like that person, that’s the way I feel or that’s the way I would act.”  When most of us hear the story of the “Good Samaritan,” we want to identify with the good guy, don’t we? We’d like to think that, like him, we’d be helpful and kind. None of us wants to be the priest or the Levite; too busy, or too self-important, or too something to care.  We like to think of ourselves as the good, kind, Mother Teresa type person … selflessly coming to the aid of a stranger.

But Jesus was a good storyteller, and he used a set of three to build their expectations.  It is a standard storytelling technique.  Play into expectations, and then give it a twist. We are all familiar with sets of three:  “A minister, a priest and a \_\_\_\_? went into a bar.”  A rabbi of course.  “The Father, Son and \_\_\_\_\_?”  Holy Spirit.  Larry, Moe, and \_\_\_\_\_? Curley. We know how this works.   A Jewish person knew what came next, “A priest, a Levite and . . .   an Israelite. But Jesus threw them a curve-ball.  Just when they were expecting a nice, helpful Jewish boy, Jesus popped a hated enemy into the story. Not only that, he made him the hero of the story. Jesus shook up their preconceived notion of where they could look for help in time of need. Jesus told the lawyer, and the crowd, that your neighbor … the one who will help you … could very well be the person you least expect.

When he asked Jesus who his neighbor was, the lawyer was trying to define the limits of his own love, the requirements of his ethical actions toward others. Jesus turned this upside down by establishing a love ethic that has no limits … that does not operate from definitions of who’s in and who’s out.  Jesus moved beyond the question of who we are required to help. He moved beyond the surprise about who might help us … to much bigger questions of our willingness to receive help, and to allow that help to change us.

In June 1996, there was a KKK rally in Ann Arbor, Michigan.  As you can imagine, this liberal, progressive, university town was not particularly welcoming to the Klan, and many, many protesters hit the street to make their displeasure known.  There were police lining the parade route … there was a barrier put up to separate the protesters from the marchers … the anti-Klan folk far outnumbered both the Klansmen and their hangers-on.  In the midst of the activities, one of those hangers-on, a man with a confederate flag tee-shirt and a Nazi SS tattoo found himself on the wrong side of the police line and the barrier … he had stumbled into the midst of the protesters.  And they turned on him, they started pushing and punching … he ran, they chased … he fell, and they pounced.  Amid shouts of “Kill the Nazi,” they began to beat him with the sticks holding their placards.

And in the midst of all this, a “Samaritan” showed up. Keisha Thomas, an 18-year-old African-American woman, leapt out from the crowd and spread herself on top of the man, shouting out, “This isn’t right, this isn’t right … you can’t beat goodness into a person.”  And the sight of this fierce and insistent black teen-ager protecting a middle-aged white racist man stopped that crowd in their tracks.  Keisha was not hurt and the man himself got up and left without saying a word, but a year or so later a young white man approached her and hesitantly said, “Thank you … you saved my father’s life.”

Did her actions change the man she saved? We can’t know.  But there is a hint that her actions changed the man’s son, at least a little bit.  Her actions halted a cycle of violence and turned it in a new direction.  She saw a man whom everyone else considered an enemy and she acted toward him as if he were her neighbor.  He experienced mercy from someone whom he expected to be an enemy, whom he would have treated as an enemy.

Jesus tells us to love our neighbors.  He also tells us to love our enemies.  This is because, as Chesterton said, if we read the bible right … and we read our neighbor and enemies right … if we see all of them with the eyes of faith … we are all the same people and we are called to love and be loved without limit and without hesitation.

So, I want to invite you to be a part, to obey Christ’s command to "go and do likewise." Every single time we celebrate communion and invite every person who wishes to be included in God’s Christian family to join us, we are declaring God’s universal love and acting against those who choose to exclude "the despised and rejected" of the moment. Our communion meal is a political statement. It is a counter-cultural statement. Most importantly, it is an expression of our spiritual commitment, because in this meal we remember the ultimate act and the supreme model of the One who told us to love our neighbors and showed us how.

Join yourself to the body of Christ. Accept God’s love for you and be filled with God’s love for your neighbor, who is *everyone* in the world who needs God’s love. And let us with courage and clarity keep the mission of this church alive in our time and for our future. May we pray?

We thank you, God of time and space, for the call to transcend the small world of the self and lose ourselves in your great and global vision of a world of caring grace. Spirit of mercy and grace, let our small deeds turn to inspiration, vision, courage, and action as we live out your call in Jesus’ name. Amen.