

## Who is My Neighbor?

The gospel this morning tells us a very familiar story - that of the Good Samaritan. Most of us heard the story of this compassionate man in Sunday School. We heard the story of how the traveling man was beset by thieves and left for dead, of how first a priest and then a Levite, passed by on the other side of the road, not wanting to be involved. It was a Samaritan, an outcast, who took pity, bandaged his wounds, took him to an inn, left money for his care and promised to return. We all knew that we were to be like the Samaritan, to be kind and offer assistance to those in need.

For many of us, that was the core of the story - that was how to be a good neighbor. The term "Good Samaritan" is even an idiom, the term used by Christian and non Christian alike to refer to someone who has done a good deed. We even have enacted "Good Samaritan laws" to protect from lawsuits those who stop at an accident or disaster to offer assistance . So much a part of our common knowledge is this story that I wondered what could I possibly say that hadn't been said before and said often. Be good, be compassionate "Go and do likewise".

Luckily there were others who guided me on the path of reflection.

We could focus again on the Good Samaritan as did The Reverend Hugh Magers ([http://www.episcopalchurch.org/6087\\_7998\\_ENG\\_HTML.htm](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/6087_7998_ENG_HTML.htm)); his focus was on the Samaritan's actions and what he did. First he interrupted his journey, he did what was necessary, and then he made arrangements for the future. I was struck by Rev Magers' observation that "when we interrupt our own journey for the sake of someone else, we find more meaning in the relationship than we have in the personal journey".

We've all had the experience of stopping what we are doing to help out someone. And having had that someone turn out to be a good friend or to change our personal journey.

Some 20 years ago I went to a dinner theater with Fr. Green and some people from St. James. I was very new to the church having come through a very troubled time in my life. Georgia Young, an older woman (probably the age I am now!), spent some time talking about missing the Nine Lessons and Carols service. It had always been a special service in her life's memories. But St. James had no choir and she doubted she'd ever experience it again. Hmmm. Seemed like a simple thing to get together (if you know nothing about what it takes) and I dove in to encourage Gretchen Wagner to lead a group of us to doing that service. Georgia loved it. It was such a good experience that many of us wanted to keep singing but Gretchen wasn't interested in being a permanent choir director. I still have no idea how I ended up doing it; after all, I

had no formal training other than being a choir member, but it certainly changed my personal journey and my relationship with St. James.

But that hardly seems Good Samaritan. It's easy indeed to interrupt one's journey for the known, the familiar. Love God - Love your neighbor as yourself. But as the lawyer asked "Who is my neighbor?"

The lawyer asked the question of Jesus - and the scripture states that he asked the question as a means of justifying himself - of showing that he knew the law - that he was doing all that God asked him to do.

But in the asking "Who Is My Neighbor", who is it that I am to love as I love myself; who is it that I am to show compassion to; who is it that I am called to care for? - the lawyer is really asking Jesus another question. By implication the question of "who is my neighbor" suggests the opposite question is also being asked. "Who is NOT my neighbor? Who is it that I am allowed to ignore or to neglect? Perhaps even to hate? What is the minimal thing that I need to do to keep God's law of love - and what can I safely get away with not doing....Surely there are people who are not our neighbors. People who deserve our rebuke, our contempt, our anger, people who have broken God's law in the most horrible ways imaginable?" [Rev Richard Fairchild <http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/c-or15smsu.php>]

We've had too many images of those in recent history. Hitler, Stalin or more recently the terrorists of 9/11, the insurgents of Iraq who dismember and behead those they capture, the rapist, the serial killer. These people live outside the law of God. Surely we do not need to love them.

Who is worthy of our love?

Who is not worthy - and do we let that anger toward those who create horror extend to others, do we fail to discriminate between a group of people in which there are those that have done wrong, and those who have not? I found myself recently so angered, so repelled by the actions of the beheaders, that I said with *significant anger what kind of religious belief could lead people to those acts* - and on calmer reflection I know that the actions of those who create horror are not and should not be attributed to the whole.

But to justify choosing our neighbors by listing those who live so appallingly outside the law of God, diverts us from facing to whom must I become a neighbor, what must I do to be a neighbor?

How often do we write people off, not because of horrible acts, but because they are different from us, do not live as we live, do not make the choices that we make. How often do we isolate ourselves in our communities, our groups of friends and turn away from - and ignore - others different from ourselves. How often do we let our prejudices keep us from facing the needs of others?

I've been struck recently that we in Minnesota can not resolve the very real issues of budget, of people's health and welfare needs, of the needs of educating our young, of the needs of our senior citizens for reasonable drug costs, because we can't put aside an issue of what constitutes marriage -as if that issue transcended all others. What must we do to be a neighbor?

In my work at the university, the students with whom I work offer a workshop called BARNGA. It is a card tournament that isn't what it seems. Its purpose is to demonstrate how we react when we assume that all others look at the world, the game, with the same vision, the same rules, that we hold, rather than the reality of differences of culture, or place of origin, or physical being. We have learned together that not looking a person in the eye when speaking may be a sign of dishonesty or lying in one culture, but a sign of respect in another, that directness of eye contact is a sign of respect in one culture but a sign of hostility in another. That learning not to stare as we were instructed by our parents has resulted in a whole class of people, the visibly disabled, not being seen at all. That not wanting to shake hands is rude in one culture, appropriate for a woman in another.

It is so easy for us to discount those who are different, those who have made us uncomfortable, those who are annoying.

What keeps you, what keeps me, from loving others, from recognizing them as our neighbors? From not only recognizing them as our neighbors, but actually reaching out to them, actually loving them. Each day God sends people to us - people for us to love - do we turn away, pass them by without seeing? In the words of the hymn we often sing in Holy Week

“When Jesus came to live with us: we simply passed him by,  
we never hurt a hair of him, we only let him die;  
for we had grown more tender and we would not give him pain,  
we only just passed down the street and left him in the rain”

We are called to be neighbors to those who seem *not* to be our neighbors, to love those who do not necessarily love us, to give to others who may not ever give back to us.

In closing I'd like to share a prayer, a meditation I adapted from one written by the Rev Richard Fairchild of the United Church of Canada. It is his questions that led me to the reflections I've shared with you this morning.

Let us take a moment to remember before God the kinds of people we say are our neighbors; the people we try to pass by on the other side of the road:

- \* people whose skin is not the same color as ours
- \* people whose life choices are different from ours
- \* people whose bodies are broken or twisted by disease or injury
- \* people whose politics differ from our own
- \* people whose traditions are not those like ours
- \* the mother on welfare
- \* the person addicted
- \* the young man with AIDS
- \* the young person in prison
- \* the person just released from the mental hospital
- \* the person who has hurt us
- \* the person who works for us, the one paid to look after us

And let us confess our reasons for avoiding them, for not loving them:

- \* our fear of moral contamination
- \* our inability to separate bad actions and poor choices from the people who must live with the consequences
- \* our fear that what we believe might be proved wrong
- \* our love of ease, security, possessions
- \* our traditions, our grudges, our pride, our selfishness,
- \* our lack of faith

Lord Jesus, we can't hide in the safe shadow of the law anymore.  
The light of your love shows us who our neighbors are,  
And it also shows up all the barriers we have raised;  
And all the excuses that we have rehearsed, for not loving as you love.  
Forgive us, and set us free.... Lord hear our prayer....

Amen