

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus, "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "what is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "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; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "you have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he came to the place and saw him; he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

"Who Is Our Neighbor?"

In the 1800's Frederick W. Faber penned the verse to the hymn, "There's A Wideness in God's Mercy." It describes the dynamic nature in the eternal life of God.

There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea.
There's a kindness in God's justice, which is more than liberty.
There is no place where earth's sorrows, are more felt than up in heaven,
There is no place where earth's failings, have such kindly judgment given.

For the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind
And the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more simple we should take God at God's word;
And our lives would be all sunshine, in the sweetness of our Lord.

I still remember the day that I sat across the desk from the receptionist, trying to transfer my mother's health care from the Texas VA system to the one here in Massachusetts. Under normal circumstances, I would not have been upset by the paperwork hoops that have to be jumped through when changing one's status in any system. It's a given. But that first appointment was different because my mom was very ill. When we arrived at the hospital, we were told that my mother could not keep her scheduled appointment with the doctor until she interviewed with the financial staff. Immediately, fear for my mother's well being started to arise within me. So I described my mother's current fragile status to the intake worker and asked if my mother could see the doctor that day and return the next day to do the transfer papers. She said, "No . . . but let me see what I can do." When she rose from her desk to go speak with her boss, tears filled my eyes. My tears were the mindful awareness of the Lord's Merciful Presence, active as the Spirit of Compassionate Care. To me, she was like the Samaritan in the Jesus parable who crossed over the boundary line of her job description. I wondered if she had asked herself the same question that Martin Luther King, Jr. considered "What will happen to this woman if I do not stop and help?" when he---"Went and did likewise."

The lawyer in the gospel story had a follow up question for Jesus; "Who is my neighbor?" It is a question about societal relationship. It is a boundary question that brings us to the borders of our identity where we discover the boxes of thinking, feeling, and attitude that shape the way in which we relate with neighbors. In the Samaritan parable it was about crossing over a risky line in order to bring the blessing of eternal life of God from heaven into earth. In our humanity, we all draw boxes of identity that serve us well in the coloring and shaping of our unique identity. From a Jesus perspective, this is a good and God given dynamic unless the boxes of family, race, gender, ethnicity, religion, geographic location,

language, political affiliation, enemy, wealth, social class, principles, values, character and personality traits . . . serve to exclude rather than include people in the eternal life of God. When the lawyer asked: “Who Is My Neighbor?” he wanted to know who he could exclude and still keep in right relationship with God.

The church uses Jesus’ parable of the “Good Samaritan” as a teaching story in the formation of Christian Spirituality. Its message is simple: Followers of Jesus’ Way can experience the eternal life of God here on earth. It happens whenever we practice compassion and give loving care. It means crossing over into someone else’s space to help them at their point of need (not one’s own). It means loving without the expectation of getting anything in return.

Throughout the years, the church and society have used the “Good Samaritan” parable of Jesus in many ways. In church, when we focus our mission work, we do so by asking the question that the lawyer asked of Jesus: “Who is our neighbor?” Fortunately, Jesus did not say, everyone. He did however, help us out by telling a story which named the LEAST expected person in the story as the one who fulfilled the will of God. Most recently, our UCC Massachusetts Conference Minister used it in this way to help us identify the environmental crisis as a shared mission concern for our local churches. In his State of the Massachusetts Conference address to the Annual meeting of churches gathered in Worcester on June 2010, he said:

I’m going to borrow from an approach our Regional Ministers sometimes use when they have their first meeting with a search committee. They ask the search committee to answer three key questions: Who are we now? What is God calling us to become? Who is our neighbor?

Later Rev. Antal surprised us with this definition of neighbor.

The challenge now confronting people of every faith tradition is to expand our understanding of “neighbor” to include yet-to-be-born generations of both humans and animals alike (I would include plants and the elemental earth as well). We must do this because technology gives us the capacity to irretrievably harm all future life. If we treat future generations as our neighbor, it would be unthinkable for six generations of humans to have burned over half the oil and gas reserves that nature took over 100 million years to create.

If we identify our neighbor as the next generation, then we might identify with G.K. Chesterton, who, when asked what was most wrong with the world, replied: “I am.” If we do, then, with the help of God, we become mindful of our carbon footprint.

It all started when the lawyer asked Jesus the question, “What shall we do to inherit eternal life?” The answer, as the interpreter of the law knew quite well, was: “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; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” When Jesus went to the next level of interpretation concerning the neighbor, it meant “going and doing” like the Samaritan. Barbara Taylor Brown concluded one of her sermons on this gospel text with this blessing.

To hear Jesus talk about it, eternal life also means hitting the jackpot now, eternal life means enjoying a depth and breadth and sweetness of life that is available right this minute and not only after we have breathed our last. Let the summer showers of God’s love soak the seeds of your right answers so that they blossom into right actions, and watch the landscape begin to change. Just do it, and find out that when you do, you do live, and live abundantly, just like the man said.