Sermon 7-14-19

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**Who Is My Neighbor? - July 14, 2019**

With a parable as beloved as the Good Samaritan, we might easily neglect the stories’ context: “A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to gain eternal life?’ Jesus replied, ‘What is written in the law? How do you interpret it?’ He responded, ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.’ But the legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’"

Amy Jill Levine says that the Greek word for “test” means to test, tempt, or entrap. Why do conversations about faith so often drift into word games where we try to check for buzzwords, win a point, or amplify differences?  Jesus deftly answers the testor’s question with two questions: “What is written in the law? How do you interpret it?" The Savior and the testor agree that eternal life is found by loving God and loving your neighbor as you love yourself!  However, Jesus adds one thing: “Do this and you will live.”

     But we ask, “Who is my neighbor?” Why do we ask for a definition of our neighbor? Is it because if we nail down a definition of neighbor we can compartmentalize our duty to love others? With lines defining our neighborhood boundaries do we build walls and stop loving at our borders? Do unspoken definitions of social borders allow us to keep space between us and them?Does it allow us room to blame them? Do our lines allow us to rationalize denying others equal protection under the law, the benefits of our privilege, or Christ’s example of radical hospitality?

"And who exactly is my neighbor?"Jesus evades our efforts to escape moral obligations via legalistic maneuvering by refusing to give us a definition of neighbor!. “What is written kills, but the Spirit gives life.” (2 Corinthians 3:6) The letter finds a way to evade God’s love, so Jesus does theology not with a strict definition but with a story. Our spiritual gut, the humanity within a stranger’s story, can guide us into the truth our minds more slowly embrace. Jesus came not as letters on a page, but within the human story.

Prayer: “Who are our neighbors?”Oh Lord, in love, you left heaven’s neighborhood to dwell with us. And how did we receive You? Teach us to welcome others as you welcome us. Amen.

A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. A solo traveler left Jerusalem heading down towards the Jordan River Valley and Jericho, the city of palms. The 2,000 foot descent winds down into fertile fields of wheat, row crops, and citrus. Mountain streams and vast networks of irrigation channels feed lemon, pear, orange, olive, almond, and date trees. Amid the beauty, a solo travel risked danger. There was no highway patrol or cell phones.  Despite swift Roman justice gangs of robbers hid in abandoned shepherd huts, craggy rock outcrops and thick groves of palm trees. Jesus tells us our solo traveler encountered thieves who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death. A gang of robbers, or violent criminals, strip the victim. Now the robbers may have only stole the clothes, as most people in the ancient world did not own an extra set of clothes, so even used clothing was worth stealing. The gang leaves our traveler naked, beaten and nearing death. This is a violent crime.

A crime scene raises tension and stirs fear. Perhaps, we might exercise some compassion and ease our self righteous judgements of the priest and the Levite who hustle past. Jesus is seeking to answer who is my neighbor, not to assign blame.

Jesus tells us, “Now it just so happened that a priest was also going down the same road. When he saw the injured man, he crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way.” This parable surely calls out legalistic living, still some Christian sermons push it a bit too far, by telling us how the laws of Leviticus prohibited Jewish priests from touching a dead body or blood. As to interpretation, scholars tell us that even zealous Pharisees, taking on the strictest vows of a Nazarite, were expected to make every effort to save a life. The priest was not worried about being made unclean, they understood “the Lord is full of mercy and compassion.” (Psalm 111) So perhaps our priest was just afraid. It would be a shock to see a naked person, bloodied, beaten and perhaps dead just off the road in an irrigation ditch. Have the robbers left the area? If they could so abuse that man, what will happen to me, an old priest, if I stop now? Is this a trap? Perhaps I better not risk the same fate. This is a busy road. Perhaps, a Roman soldier might come along, and if not I will alert the Imperial garrison once I arrive in Jericho!  Oh, if I just had a cell phone, I could be that Good Samaritan.

     Likewise, a Levite came by that spot, saw the injured man, and crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. Was it the nudity? Did they wonder if our solo traveler was a sex worker? Did we imagine that fellow in the ditch was an opioid addict or a gang banger? Did we say tut-tut was we moved on by?

Now with two unsympathetic characters gone, would you pause the story and imagine the worst kind of person you can think of? Don't think of the old BIblical rivalry!  Who is your rival, the worst, the people who set you on edge? Make that your Samaritan. Does your Samaritan wear a rainbow tunic, a Mayor Pete shirt, or a hijab? Could they wear that red MAGA hat? Feel that sinful bitter burn every time your Samaritan makes the right move.

Who is my neighbor?   A Samaritan, who was going places, came to where the man was. But when they saw the naked bloody victim, they were moved with compassion. Compassion changes everything. Jesus came preaching, “Change your hearts and lives, join in the kingdom of heaven!” (Matthew 4:17)

     Seeing the wounded traveler, with compassion, that Samaritan does not see a category, a stereotype, or a definition that lets them off the hook. They see a person!  Inspired by compassion, That Samaritan risks lingering robbers, and without any latex gloves steps into a terrible crime scene. Imagine that Samaritan kneeling beside your beloved relative or friend’s wounds, rendering aid with reassurance and compassion. That Samaritan rips apart their tunic to make bandages. The bleeding stopped, they go to their stately intelligent mule, reach into the saddle bags, and take out a skin of expensive wine that they just purchased at the Jerusalem market. They clean the dirt from your kindred’s wounds with gentle whispers and make up a batch of ancient Tylenol. Your kindred now rests against a  palm tree. Some might scoff at the scene being unable to imagine a scenario that involves a Samaritan saving the day. Some might call the police envisioning the Samaritan as the criminal. But, way outside their zip code, the Samaritan unloads the saddle bags filled with wine and high dollar olive oil. They fashion the mule’s lavish load into a makeshift backpack and rig a saddle on the mule’s back. The Samaritan merchant’s mule, money, and trade-goods make them a rich target for the robbers. Still they tenderly ease your beloved to their feet and with a grunt lift your no longer dying friend onto the fabricated saddle. They hoist the mule’s load onto their shoulders and take the reins leading the make-shift ambulance towards the nearest inn. Inns were the hospitals of the ancient world; Jesus was born in one! The Samaritan will sit up all night watching over your loved one, bringing them water and helping them to the outhouse at 2 am. At sunrise, already delayed and sleep deprived that Samaritan will wash bloody tunics and leave some clothes for your once naked kindred. That Samaritan heads to the innkeeper and flashes that platinum card authorizing two days wages instructing, “Take care of our friend, and when I return, I will pay you back for any additional costs.”

Tired, poorer, and a day behind, that Samaritan repacks the mule’s saddle bags, whistling with the joy of not needing to carry the bundle of goods nor steady an injured rider, or is it something deeper? Did you notice the saddlebags rich Corinthian leather with a tinge of envy? That Samaritan heads out no doubt pressing on to much delayed business. No, the Samaritan pauses, ties up the mule at the water trough, and goes back inside for one last check.The fitful night behind them, your once dying friend gently snoozes away. “Peace be with you, friend.” The Samaritan unties their mule and walks humming their morning prayers, tired, but full of the joy of compassion actualized by actions.

What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the one who encountered thieves? Who do you think, the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan will embrace their kin and tell their prayer group saying, “You will not believe what God put in my path today!”

You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live. Go and do likewise. Amen.