

Luke 10:25-37
July 11, 2010

South Plains Presbyterian Church

The Neighbor Problem

I have too many neighbors. It's not just that the planet is becoming crowded. I have more meaningful relationships of one sort or another than I can keep up with. Some of us living along the same road pay \$20 a year to call each other neighbors in the association. There are other interest groups with no dues. I have job-related acquaintances (some of whom are dear friends), and extended family. Are they all my neighbors? Then there's Facebook with a button that lets me confirm or ignore people who want to be my friend; and hurricane victims, refugees, starving orphans in Darfur and political prisoners in China. The media, often through the church, tells me that they also are neighbors.

When the lawyer asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" he was surely hoping to torment the upstart Galilean rabbi with a difficult question, but he points out a very real problem for us all. Who is the neighbor that scripture intends for me to love with the same concern I spend on myself?

The parable of the good Samaritan seems to suggest that the obligation to love our neighbor may fall upon us in a random, unexpected fashion. Taken literally, anyone I meet along the road or on the sidewalk, anyone with a demonstrable need may be my neighbor.

As a general rule, need is a pretty reliable guide for identifying those we are commanded to love. However, it does not solve the problem of too many neighbors.

One classical response to the problem is to sell all that we have and give the money to the poor. Whenever we see someone in need, we give what we have. If we have nothing left to give, our conscience can rest easy because we have done all we could. St. Francis of Assisi did this. Francis was born into a rich, merchant family in the Middle Ages, and when he came of age he gave his wealth away in order to identify with the poor. Oscar Wilde once wrote, "Like dear St. Francis of Assisi I am wedded to Poverty: but in my case the marriage is not a success."

I do not believe most of us are called to a life of absolute poverty, nor should we respond to every need we meet. How do we decide?

We get a clue from the story around the parable. It's a lawyer story. The lawyer wants to test Jesus' knowledge of the scriptures, so he asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. He's an adversary, not a seeker. As Jesus tells the parable, the professional religious people, the priest and the levite, the preacher and the deacon make the wrong choice. The Samaritan chose rightly. According to the scriptures, Samaritans were unclean; they were heretics; and they were social outcasts. When Jesus asks which of the three was a neighbor to the man robbed and beaten by thieves, the

lawyer gets the right answer but he cannot bring himself to say the word "Samaritan." The social and cultural barriers that separated good Jews from Samaritans were so deeply ingrained that he could not imagine these outsiders providing a model for obedience to scripture. To update the parable for our time, call it the parable of the Good Muslim.

The lawyer substitutes an abstraction for the concrete reality of this neighborly person. The neighbor is the one who showed mercy. What a wonderful, unintended clue to the heart of the commandment to love our neighbor as we love ourselves! We show mercy. Mercy is more than helpfulness, more than mere forgiveness. It's closely akin to grace and blessing and the Old Testament loving kindness. Mercy is the unwarranted compassion and generosity shown by the Samaritan who pays for the victim's motel bill. It's a strong and generous rescue, the kind of thing we can't do every day. But, when we can act with this kind of mercy, we have been a neighbor indeed.

Mercy sets aside our need for self-preservation. It forgets about limited resources and making an appropriate referral to an agency and the likelihood that giving too much will create dependency. Mercy just gives itself away in a very unlawyerly fashion. Most Presbyterians have an affinity for lawyers. We choose our words carefully and we pick our charities even more carefully. I could do with a little more of the spontaneity exhibited by the Samaritan, a little less calculating of

costs versus benefits, and a lot more unwarranted compassion.

In the story from Luke's gospel, the lawyer drops out of sight. We may not see any more of him, but I can imagine him walking away with his buddies, muttering to himself, "Yeah, that's one isolated incident. What about the dozens of other times every day when I meet someone who needs help? Are we supposed to help every single person we see in trouble?"

That's a legitimate question. Surely Jesus himself did not heal every disease, repair every deformity, drive out every demonic spirit or mental illness in Palestine. Jesus' ministry was guided by the Holy Spirit. In the gospel of John, he promises to send the Holy Spirit to his followers. Luke writes in the book of Acts that it was the Holy Spirit empowering the disciples after the resurrection, spreading the church, enabling the good deeds of the early church to serve as a witness to faith in Jesus Christ.

I believe we get another clue about applying this parable to our lives by remembering the context. In good Jewish fashion, the parable interprets the law: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." In another place Jesus says the whole law hangs on these two commandments. In our sound bite culture we like to think we have captured the whole will of God in loving God and loving

neighbors. For all practical purposes, so the thinking goes, everything boils down to the golden rule.

Yes and No. If we could really love our neighbors as the Samaritan does in the parable, we would do well. Unfortunately, we cannot. Moreover, that's not what Jesus is saying. He gives priority to loving God with heart, soul, strength and mind. And, he attaches all the law and the prophets, all of scripture to these two commandments. He does not reduce all religion to "love your neighbor as yourself." We discover our neighbors through the whole of scripture.

One of the curious things about the Holy Spirit is that it blows where it will, like the summer breeze. If we want a good breeze, we're more likely to find it on the top of the hill or better yet on the mountain. If we're looking for help from the Holy Spirit, we're more likely to find it in scripture. Jennifer Lord at Austin Presbyterian Seminary says, "What we pray gets into our bones." I believe Jesus means for the two commandments, love God and love neighbor, to send us back into the law and the prophets. The Holy Spirit doesn't get into our bones by accident or by restricting our prayers to "Now I lay me down to sleep," although that's a good way to conclude our prayers each night. We have at our disposal the prayers of the psalmist, those of Moses, Isaiah and Paul; and especially the prayers of Jesus. They are the calcium that builds the strong bones of faith, the wise bones of obedience, the willing bones of service, the generous bones of mercy.

In the end, the neighbor problem is not that we have too many neighbors or even too many opportunities to show love. The neighbor problem is my problem becoming the kind of neighbor Jesus is talking about. How can I sensitize myself to the needs around me and to the prompting of the Holy Spirit guiding me toward the particular needs I can meet?

So much energy is expended saving love so we won't run out. We imagine ourselves poverty-stricken without the resources to give enough to truly help another person. We're afraid of wasting our time and resources on the undeserving. It is true that occasionally we will come across a victim of robbery like the man in the parable, a person whose need swallows up our disposable income for the moment. Occasionally, we get requests for help with hurricane or earthquake victims. This church responds generously to global needs. The parable of the good Samaritan would direct our attention to the everyday need for mercy on the streets of Charlottesville, the roads of Fluvanna and Louisa and Albemarle.

It's a call to immerse ourselves again in the pages of scripture that we might become more sensitive to the movement of the Holy Spirit around us. The parable reminds me of those flashing signs used by the highway patrol to alert us to an accident. Only Jesus uses the story to call our attention, not only to those in need around us, but also to the model of loving obedience: a

Samaritan, a social outcast, a religious heretic or pagan, one of those people we have to share the sidewalk with despite their dirty clothes and unwashed bodies and crazy religion. Jesus says, "If you want to learn how to love your neighbor, you might have to look first to people who are not Christians, but who are showing mercy."

There's only one neighbor I can worry about. It is I. I'm the one who needs help and the help I need is the help of the Holy Spirit in showing mercy to those around me. Go and do likewise, says Jesus.