

Sunday, September 22, 2013  
Isaiah 58:6-10; Luke 10:25-37

### ***My Neighbor is Who?***

**Rev. Adrienne Carr**

Most of us grew up with the story of the Good Samaritan. It is a thread in the fabric of Christian education. In fact, you have not truly lived until you have experienced the Middle School youth group act out the story. Sometimes, though, when we know a passage well, we lose the punchline and the teaching message that Christ intended as part of the rule book for Christian Living. This week, as we are invited to provide support to those many anonymous neighbors who share our community and our world, it is good to remind ourselves of that punchline.

Jesus was asked a trick question by Rabbinical Lawyer. Wanting to take Jesus down a peg or two, he asked a theological question, assured that he could poke holes in the answer and discredit Jesus. Hoping that Jesus would say something heretical or tie himself up in a discussion of the observance of the law, he asked, "What must I do to gain eternal life?" Obviously, he had not done his homework. Jesus used a rabbinical technique and returned the question with another, asking him what answer is found in Scripture. The Lawyer replied with a spiritual summary of the Law: Love of God and Love of Neighbor as self. Jesus responded that the lawyer had answered well and then said, "If you do this, you will have eternal life." "IF." That is the key word. The lawyer just couldn't let it go. Isn't it taught somewhere in Law School not to ask a question unless you already know the answer "Just one more question, your Honor." Winston Churchill once said, "Lawyers occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing had happened."<sup>1</sup> That is precisely the story of the Rabbinical Scholar. But we can thank that lawyer because through him we have a remarkable illustration of what it means to be neighbor and it is not a suggestion. It is a mandate for Christian life.

The title of this sermon is a comment as well as a question. When I was growing up, we lived in an area of Boston called Forest Hills. It had two claims to fame. One was the Forest Hills Cemetery, the final resting place of a number of movers and shakers among whom are William Lloyd Garrison, Eugene O'Neill, the poets e.e. Cummings and Anne Sexton. The other is Forest Hills Station, the last stop on the Orange Line of the Boston Subway system. Between those two points was the neighborhood. It was close knit and being largely Irish, the Brogue was heard in numerous households and 10 or 12 children in a family was not a surprising number. Our family was small. There were only 7 of us kids.

Back then, if I was asked who my neighbor was, I would name the families who lived on my street. We kids walked to school together, played games, went to scouts and our parents played cards together, went to Church meetings together, and were scout leaders. Once, one of the kids down the street, while playing with matches, set his house on fire. My mother promptly collected all the children of his family, set them places at our table and made room for them to sleep with us that night. That was being neighbor.

Yet, neighborhood had its limits, extending only to those borders. In our bubble there was no awareness of or imagination given to those out there beyond us. It pains me but I have to say that no one, not the priest at the pulpit or the

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.iciclesoftware.com/LawJokes/IcicleLawJokes.html#Literary>

nuns in the school ever challenged us to think beyond who and where we were. Only once a year during Lent was there any kind of a challenge. We were given small cardboard boxes at the beginning of Lent and asked to contribute our nickels, dimes and pennies for the work in the missions. Our goal was solely to raise money so that children in alien places could be saved and go to heaven. There was no thought given to how they lived out their lives; only that their souls needed saving. And I never considered that those hungry children needed more than Baptism. Is that isolated sense of self and community a part of your background as well? Let's talk some time.

That Rabbinical Lawyer lived a life somewhat similar to mine and to many of yours. Surrounded as they were by Roman troops, the people of Judea isolated themselves into their own communities, observing the Torah Feasts and abiding by the Law. They politically hated the Roman presence and through total immersion in their culture, could find ways to ignore the occupation. Thus during the time of Jesus, an uneasy peace prevailed.

The Samaritans were a different presence. Following the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel and the exile of thousands of Israelites to Assyria in the 700's B.C., Assyria sent gentile refugees to Israel where they intermarried with the surviving Jews, converted, built a Temple on Mt. Gerezim and became known as Samaritans. The Kingdom of Judah was destroyed by Babylon about 200 years later. Under Persia, the people of Judah were allowed to return and re-build Jerusalem. They began with the temple. The Samaritans, expecting to be welcomed as reunited family, offered to help the returnees but were called non-Jews and rudely sent away.

Bad blood between the two groups resulted in several violent encounters through the years with loss of life on both sides. And as political animosity existed between Jews and Romans, spiritual gut wrenching animosity existed between Samaritans and Jews. By the time of Jesus, even talking to a Samaritan was prohibited, let alone touching one. That is why the parable of the Good Samaritan is far more profoundly challenging than the simple teaching moment we hear. And that is why I turned the teaching question around from 'Who is my neighbor,' to 'My neighbor is WHO!'

Absolutely, the lawyer would agree, my neighbor is the hungry widow, the blind beggar, the leper who lives in the caves. In keeping with the law, it was the responsibility of every faithful Jew to care for the poor, the sick, the stranger. In fact, that teaching was underscored by the prophet Isaiah in Chapter 58. Our Jewish friends and neighbors hear that chapter in their day long Fast and Service of Yom Kippur. Listen again these words:

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?  
<sup>7</sup> Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—  
when you see the naked, to clothe them,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"

In the parable, those paragons of virtue, those strict observers of the holiness code in the Law, might have felt sorry for the bloody and unconscious man but, in keeping with "The Law," they were not allowed to touch him and thus become unclean. They had obviously forgotten the stirring command of Isaiah not 'to turn away from your own flesh and blood.' Jesus presented his listeners

with a story that should have shaken them to the core. Did that lawyer feel shaken as he was presented with an indictment? What good is a law that prohibits one from reaching out to another in need, or more telling, provides an excuse for not helping? As difficult as it was to hear the first part of the parable, the listeners, including the lawyer were shocked to the core of their worldview at the saving role of the Samaritan. MY NEIGHBOR IS WHO!

This parable is timeless. It forces us to look beyond our comfort levels, our bubbles of isolation and focus on the wide world and expansive definition of neighbor. I go back to my childhood for my own changing definition. Back in the ancient times of my youth, Forest Hills Station was the final stop of the Elevated Train. I daily took the crowded train to High School, and being young and polite, always stood, letting the old people in their thirties have the seats. On the way, as I looked out the train, I saw through the windows of passing tenements brief glimpses of the face of poverty. Places where those who could afford no more than a small apartment constantly bombarded by the sound of the trains passing at eye level, lived hopeless lives. Particularly in summer, windows were open to the noise and the smell of the trains not more than 30 or 40 feet away. I often glanced into those windows to view that face of poverty. I was curious but also concerned at the unfairness of life. I would not have known the residents of those apartments, and with that narrow definition of neighbor, could see no connection except pity and pity without action is an empty emotion.

It took a lot of growing and a lot of experience for me to develop my own sense of neighbor. It took a summer in Harlem in 1968. It took over a year in Taiwan. It took 10 years working with homeless men and women in a suburb of Washington, DC. It took being arrested in front of the South African Embassy and it took trips to Israel/Palestine, Jordan, Iran, Russia and Haiti to open my heart to the reality that we are all interconnected; that we are all neighbor. And yet, life is complicated. And we are all guilty to some degree of loving ourselves a heck of a lot more than we love our neighbor.

The enormity of pain and suffering in our community and across our world is overwhelming. If you watch television news or read the paper or pull up blogs on your computer, I do not have to tell you that. When you pick up your mail, do you become as discouraged as I? I am personally keeping the Post Office alive in receiving multiple appeals from every non-profit I have ever supported. All of them do good work and do very good work at reminding me that I am neighbor to millions of hungry, sick, impoverished world neighbors of mine. Most of those organizations are putting bandaids on gaping wounds. They keep some children alive, build homes for some families, teach some people to read and do their best to advocate for the people whom they serve. But where is the end to the suffering? Where is the end to the injustice? Where is world sanity?

My neighbor is who? Is it the person who opened your eyes to the inequities in the world? Is it the person you got to know by chance whose life story mad you angry on her behalf? Is it the colleague from Egypt who is a practicing Muslim and increasingly a good and trusted friend? Is it the gay couple next door with a child about the age of your son and with whom you swap playdates? Is it the Iraq vet with PTSD and her husband who both need a friend? A neighbor is a both/and relationship. It is a giving and a receiving commitment so strong that there is no need to ponder sharing a word, or doing a deed. The neighbor knows intuitively that the shoulder to cry on or the laugh to share is just what he would want for himself. And in that sharing, that mutual love and respect, God is present.

We come back to the pain that our neighbors throughout the world feel every moment of every day; the pain of hunger, the pain of war, the pain of discrimination and persecution, the pain of environmental breakdown, the pain of uncontrolled guns, the pain resulting from corporate greed. The list goes on, doesn't it? And there is no easy solution and no real authority allowed to flow out of the United Nations. Perhaps that is the reality we must confront.

To be a neighbor, one gives up a bit of oneself. You may not like it but you eat the food that your neighbor lovingly prepared. You are tired and want to go to bed early but your neighbor is lonely and invites you over for a movie. You have been quietly preparing a surprise party for your neighbor, not knowing how uncomfortable he feels at such events. He never lets you know how difficult the evening was but fervently hopes that you don't do it again.

What would it take for the nations of the world to begin to see themselves as good neighbors and to act internally as though all the people in their nations were neighbors; not tribes or sects but neighbors? What can any of us do except complain or pray or do both?

And if the only thing we can do is ask ourselves how we might be better neighbors; more aware of the needs of others; more intent on accepting and learning to appreciate the differences between ourselves and others. By doing so, we begin to model God's Law in all our relationships. We begin to absorb in our beings the immensity of God's love and care for each and all of us. Isaiah has more to say:<sup>2</sup>

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression,  
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,  
<sup>10</sup> and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,  
then your light will rise in the darkness,  
and your night will become like the noonday.

<sup>11</sup> The LORD will guide you always;

If we cannot change the world, we can change ourselves. Perhaps as the light burns off the darkness, we can begin to find hope in the chaos of life. In that hope, we can joyfully answer the question, ‘My neighbor is who?’ Beneath all the differences, and reflecting all the yearnings and fears and joys, we discover that my neighbor is me. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 58:9b-11a