

Doing what needs to be done

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson, in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts on the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 11, 2010.

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Luke 10:29

Jesus always met his detractors with great grace and wisdom. His most difficult ones were lawyers who attempted to entrap him. In our gospel story today one of them asks Jesus: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answers his question with a question. "What do you read in the law?" The answer is in the book of Deuteronomy in which is written the commandment to *Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.* And in the book of Leviticus is found the commandment to *Love your neighbor as yourself.* These two commandments are known as the summary of the law because they fulfill the intent of all the other laws. Then the lawyer asks the crucial question, "And who is my neighbor?" For that, Jesus uses his classic parable of the Good Samaritan.

The story takes place on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho that is about twenty miles long. When you travel that road it seems longer because it winds around treacherous curves and steep declines. The road begins 2,300 feet above sea level and in twenty miles you descend 1,300 feet below sea level near the Dead Sea, the lowest point on the face of the earth. This road was not only difficult to travel, it was dangerous as thieves and robbers lay in wait along the way. Of course, the traveler in this story was probably foolish to journey alone and it would have been safer to be with a caravan, but there is no point in blaming the victim. He was set upon and the thieves beat and robbed him and left him for dead.

Along comes a temple priest and, seeing the beaten man, goes on his way. Temple priests lived under a strict law against touching a dead body. If the man was dead and the priest touched his body, he would be considered defiled for the next seven days and would lose his turn to serve in the temple. So, the priest doesn't stop to help, but continues on his way.

Then along comes a Levite and seeing what happened, he also passes by on the other side. He is aware that it is an old trick for thieves to have one of their own acting as a decoy by pretending to be injured in order to lure an unsuspecting and compassionate person to stop and help. Suspecting a trap, the Levite chooses to be safe rather than sorry. No doubt both the priest and the Levite in this story have compassion for the injured man, but they are prevented from stopping to help by legal restrictions and personal fears.

Jews were restricted from having anything to do with those who transgressed the law. Heretics and breakers of the law were referred to as Samaritans, whether or not they were actually from Samaria. Those who felt he was flouting the law accused Jesus of being a Samaritan.

The Samaritan in this teaching story stops to help the man because he is not held back by rules and traditions or even possible danger to himself. He only focuses on what has to be done. He cleans the man's wounds with wine and oil and places him on his animal and carries him to an inn and places him in the care of the innkeeper. He even leaves enough money with the innkeeper to cover expenses until he returns.

Two things are clear about the Good Samaritan. First, he is the only one who was willing to risk stopping to care for the injured man. In so doing, he transcends all cultural, religious and racial differences with little concern for himself. Secondly, his credit is good. The innkeeper trusts that he will keep his word and repay him for any expenses in caring for the man.

You could take a cynical view of this story. You could say that the injured man was asking for trouble by traveling alone. You could also say that the Samaritan was putting his own life at risk by stopping to help. Yet, had he not stopped, the beaten man might have died. He saw a situation and was willing to take the risk to do what had to be done.

There is always a risk in anything we do and today there is the added risk of being sued when trying to help someone. When I served as an Emergency Medical Technician and ambulance driver in New York State, we were protected under a “Good Samaritan” law. In an emergency when there was BBP, bleeding, not breathing or poisoning, you do what is immediate and necessary to care for the victim.

Years ago, my wife Diane was out walking with our children when a car collided with a man on a motorcycle. The motorcyclist lay in the street bleeding profusely. While several people stood around watching helplessly, wondering what to do, Diane got down and held his pressure points to stem the bleeding until the ambulance arrived, thereby saving his life.

The plain and simple answer to the question of who qualifies as our neighbor is anyone who needs us. There are no restrictions or limitations or qualifications on who qualifies as our neighbor. Our neighbor is not limited to those we know or like or trust. Our neighbor is of any race, religion, nationality, gender, or sexual orientation because he or she is loved by God as much as we are. Your neighbor is your spouse with whom you haven’t been out to dinner in six months. Your neighbor is your child who needs you, even when we are weary and really busy. Our neighbors are those we see on the evening news who are victims of the Gulf oil spill disaster. They are victims of violence and suffering from starvation and genocide in places torn by strife.

When someone is in need, it is not the time or place to theorize about social conditions or even about the veracity of their story. Our neighbor is the one whom it would be easy to ignore, the one who needs us at the most inconvenient time, the one who has never done anything for us and is unable to return the favor. Whenever and wherever there is someone we can help, there is our neighbor. At times like that, we spare the lecture on individual responsibility and do what we can to help. It's easy to be available to those we know and like and when it is convenient. That is why the quality of mercy and compassion is measured not only by our response, but also by our attitude. There is always a risk involved in anything and we have to be willing to take that risk.

The character of the Good Samaritan in this story reminds us that we don’t need credit or recognition when we help someone. Doing what needs to be done sometimes means having to choose between our own needs and the needs of others. We are all bound by our common humanity to which there are no barriers. We can’t say we love God and ignore our neighbor. God’s love transcends our differences. When Jesus says, “Go and do likewise,” he means that we are neighbors to both friend and stranger.