

**Doing the right thing**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 10, 2016.

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

Among the cleverest of Jesus' detractors are lawyers who try to entrap him on fine points of the law. When one of them asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus answers with a question of his own. "What do you read in the law?" The lawyer knows the commandment in the book of Deuteronomy that you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:5) He also knows that in the book of Leviticus it says, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Leviticus 19:18) These two commandments are the summary and fulfillment of all the laws.

Then the lawyer asks the crucial question of who is our neighbor. To illustrate his answer, Jesus uses his classic parable of the Good Samaritan, an example that certainly could have been taken from a real life.

The story takes place on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho that is about twenty miles long. When you travel that treacherous road there are winding, dangerous turns and steep declines. The road begins 2,300 feet above sea level and descends to 1,300 feet below sea level near the Dead Sea to the lowest point on the face of the earth. In ancient times, this road was dangerous to travel because of thieves and robbers that preyed on unsuspecting victims. Of course, the traveler in this story was probably foolish to journey alone. It would have been safer to travel with a caravan, but there is no point in blaming the victim. He was beaten and robbed and left for dead.

The first one to pass by is a temple priest who assumes the man is dead and doesn't stop to help. Temple priests were 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 of duty in the temple.

When a Levite passes by he doesn't stop either. He is aware of an old trick in which thieves plant one of their own as a decoy pretending to be injured in order to lure a traveler to stop and help. Suspecting a trap, the Levite would rather be safe than sorry. No doubt both the priest and the Levite had compassion for the injured man, but they were prevented from stopping to help because of legal restrictions and fear for safety.

In those days Jews were restricted from having anything to do with those who transgressed the law. Heretics and non-believers were referred to as Samaritans, whether or not they were actually from Samaria. Even Jesus was called a Samaritan because of his radical interpretation of the law.

The point of this teaching story is that the Samaritan takes the risk to stop and help the man. He is not held back by rules and tradition or possible danger to himself. He focuses on what has to be done. He cleans the injured traveler's wounds with wine and oil and takes him to a nearby inn, leaving him in the care of the innkeeper with enough money to cover expenses until he returns.

Three things are clear about the Samaritan. First, he is the only one who transcends cultural and religious differences to stop and help the man. He also is willing to risk his own safety to help the injured man. And, his credit is good. The innkeeper trusts that he will keep his word and repay him for any further expenses in caring for the injured man.

Now, we could take a cynical view of this story. We could say that the injured man was asking for trouble by traveling alone. We could also say that the Samaritan was foolish to put his own life at risk by stopping to help. Yet, had he not stopped, the beaten man might have died. He sees a person in trouble and is willing to take the risk of caring for the victim.

The answer to the lawyer's question is that our neighbor is anyone who needs us. There are no restrictions or limitations on who qualifies as our neighbor. They are not limited to those we know and like. They are of any race, religion, nationality, gender or sexual orientation. Our neighbor is our spouse or partner or child whom we sometimes take for granted.

It is not up to us to theorize about social conditions or whether victims should use better judgment. At times like that, we spare the lecture on individual responsibility and do what we can to help. Our neighbor is the one whom it would be easy to ignore, the one who needs us at inconvenient times and who can't do anything for us in return. It's easy to be available to those whom we know and like and when it is convenient for us. The challenge is when we don't know the person and it is not convenient.

Our neighbors are those who are victims of violence on a daily basis in areas torn by racial strife and conflict. Black lives do matter because of ongoing white supremacy and the lower value placed on the lives of African Americans. Martin Luther King said that darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that. His words are as relevant today as ever.

The quality of our compassion is measured not just in our concern, but also in our response. We have to be willing to take the risk of getting involved. Doing the right thing means giving priority to the concerns of others over our own. Whoever and wherever our neighbor is, that person is as loved and valued by God as we are.

We are all bound by our common humanity. We can't say we love God and hate or ignore our neighbor. God's impartial love in Christ transcends our differences and breaks down the barriers that separate us. We pray for victims of violence and for our compassionate response to those in need. We pray that we are never complacent about the neighbor, either one who lives next door or halfway around the world. Because we all belong to the human race we therefore share the same human concerns and needs. Our response to those in need is nothing more than doing for others what we would have them do for us.