

## ***Not Who Is, But Who Does***

Luke 10:25-37

July 15, 2007

### **I.**

Today we heard about the Good Samaritan. It's not only one of the most well known stories in the Bible, but it also has passed into our modern culture in ways that go beyond the reading itself.

You could talk to atheists about the concept of being a Good Samaritan, and many of them would understand it and agree with it. We have Good Samaritan laws that offer legal protection to people who stop and help people who are injured or ill. Hospitals and other nonprofit organizations are named after the Good Samaritan. We even have a Samaritan Guild right here at St. Thomas that reaches out to members of our congregation who cannot be with us for worship on Sundays.

But even though the story is well known, it sometimes is not well understood. Perhaps that's because it involved a lawyer who tried to lead Jesus in one direction, but Jesus wanted to go in another. We must look not at the lawyer's question but at Jesus' answer.

In short, many people think the question raised by this story is "who is my neighbor," and that the answer is "everyone is your neighbor." That certainly is an admirable concept and a lofty ideal, but it is not what Jesus said in the reading.

If we look at the reading more closely, we see that it is not about how we regard people or how we consider them, but rather how we treat them. It is not about our worldview or what we think, but rather what we do.

### **II.**

There are two parts to today's reading. For the first, we can pick it up at the point where Jesus confirmed the importance of the scriptural directive to "love your neighbor as yourself," and the lawyer questioning him basically said, "OK, so who is my neighbor?" Jesus, however, did not answer the question directly, and instead told our story about the man who was beaten and robbed, and the Samaritan who cared for him after a priest and a Levite passed by and left him beside the road.

Jesus asked who was the neighbor to the injured man, the lawyer said it was the person who stopped to help. Then Jesus said, and here is the point of the story; he said "go and do likewise."

Note that Jesus asked who was the neighbor to the injured man. He did not ask whether the injured man was anybody's neighbor. Jesus' concept of being a neighbor was focused on the person giving help, not upon the person receiving it, which was the way the lawyer tried to present it.

So we miss the point if we think today's reading means everyone is our neighbor. Jesus instead was saying that those who reach out to others, those who extend themselves to others, are the people who love others as themselves. The test is not who is, but who does. They are the good neighbors.

The second important part of the reading is that the person who helped out was a Samaritan. In Jesus' time Samaritans and Jews were a little like Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq today. Although they shared a common faith and worshipped from the same Scriptures, Jews regarded Samaritans as unclean. In part, this was because Samaritans were descendants of mixed marriages between Jews who lived in the fallen northern kingdom, and the pagan Assyrians who conquered them centuries earlier. Samaritans also rejected worship at the temple in Jerusalem, and had their

own rival temple on Mt. Gerizim not far away. In short, Jews would have nothing to do with Samaritans, religiously, socially, culturally, or in any other way.

As a result, when Jesus made a Samaritan the hero of the story, so to speak, he also made the point that when it came to being a good neighbor, social and cultural distinctions did not count, and stereotypes meant nothing. Jesus' standard was that people should help others in need no matter what the differences were between them.

### **III.**

So, how do we apply these lessons to our own lives today? Who are we supposed to help? How do we do it? Obviously, just by watching the nightly news we can see more pain and suffering in this world than we ever could eliminate on our own.

For example, we live in a world full of food and a world full of hungry people. There obviously is something wrong with that picture, but it will take almost a global effort to fix it. And there are so many needy people in the world that even trying to grasp the scope of their needs can make us dispassionate and numb rather than concerned and dedicated. It can be difficult to know what God wants us to do.

So what does loving our neighbor mean? And there are different kinds of love. We love our wives or husbands, or our parents or children, or our friends, or our dogs or cats, or any number of things, all in different ways. For me, however, loving my neighbor means being a good neighbor, and it goes beyond today's reading. It is not limited to only helping people who are ill or injured.

In the context of today's reading, I believe that loving our neighbors means intentionally extending ourselves in Christian hospitality to others. And I use the word "hospitality" in a biblical, not a social, sense.

Paul said in Romans (12:13) to extend hospitality to strangers, and told Timothy and Titus, as leaders of the church, to be faithful in practicing hospitality. (1 Ti. 3:2, Tit. 1:8). Peter (1 Pe. 4:9) said to be hospitable without complaining. And the author of the Book of Hebrews (13:2) advised "to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it."

What does this kind of hospitality mean? Well, it does not mean social entertaining, competitive cookery, or being nice to a closed circle of carefully chosen guests. It is not defined by self-interest or expectations of reciprocity. Luke talked about this elsewhere in his Gospel when he said, "when you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." (14:12-14)

Now, I do not think Luke was speaking literally for all cases, and I don't expect us to take him that way, although he was making an important point. He was saying that we cannot be modern-day Good Samaritans merely by looking at the world through our own filters of self-interest or our own sense of convenience, or by limiting our good works to our friends. Being a neighbor and reaching out in hospitality cannot be scheduled. We cannot plan it to neatly fit into the worldly things we do.

This point can be illustrated by a well-known study in 1973 by two behavioral scientists, J.M. Darley and C.D. Batson. A group of seminarians at Princeton Theological Seminary were told they were participating in a study of how quickly they could think on their feet as they prepared their sermons.

While gathered in their classroom, they were instructed to leave immediately for the campus recording studio, which was on the other side of campus, and to record a sermon on the story of the Good Samaritan. The group, however, then was divided into two parts, with one group being told they were late and had to hurry, while the other was told they had plenty of time.

Here's the catch. The researchers had positioned another student right beside the path the seminarians would be taking to record their sermons, and this other student was slumped in a doorway and made up to look like he was injured and in distress.

Well, perhaps you can guess how the study came out. The students who believed they were in a hurry passed right on by so they could record their Good Samaritan sermons on time, while several of the students who believed they had sufficient time stopped to see if they could help.

And we should not be critical of the seminarians in a hurry who passed on by. What would I have done in similar circumstances if I thought my grade in the course hung in the balance? What would you have done if taking time to help would have made you miss something you thought was important?

I would like to believe that I would have stopped anyway, and that you would have stopped anyway. But just because we know in our minds the right thing to do does not mean that we actually will do it. Our instincts and reflexes usually are not sufficient because they are geared to our own self-interest. So that means that we are called to be intentional, and to work to change our hearts.

But we are not called to fix the planet. We are only capable of dealing with a few situations, but those few are all that we need. Rather than throwing up our hands in despair because there is more to be done than can ever be completed, let's just focus on what's in front of us and, as Jesus told the lawyer in today's reading, "go and do likewise."

And in doing that we might remember that the Holy Spirit will give us opportunities to be biblical neighbors to others who might not be literal neighbors in the conventional sense, but who the Spirit nevertheless will place in our paths.

#### **IV.**

This is not something we are expected to do alone, although at times, as in today's Gospel, we are faced with situations that call for a Christian response at the moment. But we also can love our neighbors right here, in community with others at St. Thomas.

Some churches claim to be "caring" communities. Others emphasize how they are "sensitive" to one thing or another. And that all may be very good. But it doesn't really count for much if they don't do anything.

I always have recognized this reality when reading from the letter of James. He said (2:15-16) "if a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that"? The message here is that good wishes and encouraging thoughts sometimes just are not enough.

And that is today's Gospel. It is a story about doing. It has a lot of action verbs in it. In the end, Jesus not only said "love your neighbor," but he also said "go and do something about it." And in the past, especially with Hurricane Katrina, we have done a lot. But peoples' needs still are here, and I pray that we can continue to be good neighbors. *Amen.*