

everybody's boats together. All this good neighborliness starts with face-to-face contact, and it makes for a much stronger sense of community and connectedness.

That sense of community is what's missing in our parable today. The Priest and the Levite traveled on the road to Jericho from Jerusalem. When given the chance to help a fellow Jewish man beaten and robbed and left for dead, they chose not to trouble themselves with his problems. They gave him a quick glance and a wide berth and walked away. The Priest and the Levite both knew what needed to be done, but they passed. They failed to act, failed to see, and failed to feel. They turned their faces away, not just turning the other cheek, but turning their backs to suffering. We know what they did wrong – they didn't stop to help – but there's a bigger lesson to be learned here.

The clue comes in the preamble to this parable. A certain lawyer tried to test Jesus, says Luke. He asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (v. 25). Notice his insincerity: he asked his question as a challenge, a ruse to trap Jesus. The lawyer wanted to confuse Jesus by posing a moral dilemma that the lawyer believed had no clear answer. He wanted to embarrass Jesus and impress the crowd with his own debating skills. Despite the lawyer's intent, however, his question is a good one. What must we do to inherit eternal life? Most rabbis taught that Jewish lineage, circumcision, ceremonies, and traditions qualified the Jews for God's eternal kingdom. But clearly there was still a nagging sense of uncertainty in many hearts, which is why the lawyer asked his question about eternal life.

Jesus answered the lawyer's question with a question of his own: "How do you read it?" The "it" Jesus referred to is the *Keri'at Shema*, the daily reading from Deuteronomy 6:4-5: "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.*" In reply the lawyer quoted that very text, adding a verse from Leviticus 19:18: "*and your neighbor as yourself*" (v. 27) The lawyer gave the perfect summary of the law's moral demands. Jesus acknowledged the lawyer's correct answer, but Jesus also admonished him: "*Do this and you will live*" (v. 28).

Jesus held the mirror of the law up to this legal "expert" to demonstrate how the law condemned him. If the man was honest, he would acknowledge that he did not love God as he should; he didn't even love his neighbors as he should. None of us do. But the lawyer, "*wanting to justify himself,*" asked Jesus, "*Who is my neighbor?*" (v. 29).

Notice that the lawyer's question skipped right over the part about loving God! He focused, instead, on a technical point about the identity of one's neighbor. The traditional rabbinic

interpretation of Leviticus 19:18 is that you should love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but that takes all the force out of the command. If we're free to hate our enemy, then we're relieved from the duty of loving anyone whom we decide to regard as an enemy. We get to play God by choosing whom to love and whom to hate.

So, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan to show that there is no distinction with God: love and care must be shown to both friend and enemy alike. The Samaritan man showed kindness to a Jewish man who despised him. Jews looked down on Samaritans because Samaritans, who were ethnically Jewish, often married outside their own people and adopted the religious traditions of Israel's pagan neighbors. Jews and Samaritans, therefore, look askance at one another. Yet, the hero of the parable is a Samaritan man who shows compassion for his Jewish "enemy."

And not just a little kindness, this is kindness on a lavish scale. The Samaritan stopped to help. He put in face time. He got off his donkey and used his own olive oil to soothe the man's wounds. He used his own wine as an antiseptic. He lifted his human burden, risking his own back. He paid two days' wages and offered more (whatever the cost!) on his return. All this for a man he didn't even know; for a man who was, until that moment, his "enemy."

Who among us would set aside everything to help a total stranger? More to the point, who among us would do that for an enemy? God's law demands that we love like the Samaritan *all the time*. If we always truly loved our neighbors and our enemies, the Samaritan's generosity would not seem so remarkable. But it is remarkable, because we do not love like he loved. We should, but we don't. What's worse is that we've been loved lavishly like that, but we still do not return that kind of love.

The Samaritan sacrificed time and money to care for a wounded enemy. God gave God's own Son to die for sinners who deserve nothing more than death and eternal damnation. "*When we were still without strength, in due time, Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates God's own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*"; and not just sinners, but "*when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of God's Son*" (Romans 5:6-8, 10).

What Jesus did to redeem God's people far exceeds the lavish acts of the Samaritan man. Christ is the living embodiment of divine love in all its perfection. He is "*holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners*" (Hebrews 7:26), and yet he bore the penalty of sin for

others. Had the lawyer confessed his own guilt and admitted his inability to do what the law demands, Jesus would gladly have offered him an eternity of mercy, grace, forgiveness, and true love. The fact that he did not should compel us to confess our sinful weakness – revealed in our lack of compassionate, sacrificial love – and to seek God’s grace and mercy by turning with repentant faith to Jesus, who is the only source of our eternal life.

Being a good neighbor in a postmodern culture that stresses anonymity over community, reserve over compassion, me-ism over other-ism, challenges our commitment. It means crossing social lines and cultural divides. It means figuring out who is our neighbor by simply sharing 10 minutes of conversation, or lending a hand to a stranger, or making eye contact on the sidewalk or in the hallway, or even stopping to save a life.

Imagine what might happen in our church and community if we learned to know our neighbors’ faces and lives and begin to connect like Samaritans who take the time to help? Imagine what might happen in our world if we started to re-enact this classic story about somebody from outside the neighborhood, from the wrong neighborhood, who willingly drops by and lends assistance? Imagine that we begin to behave like good neighbors. That’s what Jesus is talking about, really. That’s what he is calling us to do.

Although we often say we are willing to help, like good Christians should, we rarely drop by and do anything. Although we often see the need, far too often we don’t make the effort to get off our donkeys, lift up fallen persons, and escort them to safety. The victims of our world — and there are many — would like us to drop by and stop by. Anything less is to fail at our mission.

Prayer: We thank you, God, for coming to us as a neighbor, a stranger, an immigrant, binding our wounds and carrying us to safety, so that we might love you with all our heart, soul, and mind, and welcome the stranger, loving our neighbor as ourselves. Amen.

Sources:

- Sefton, Dru. “Lost in America’s lexicon: Do drop in.” *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, July 10, 2003, E3.
- “A Dog Kept Showing Up at A Neighbor’s House for One Very Good Reason,” <http://www.reshareworthy.com/dog-tired/> (Site visited October 9, 2018).

---

<sup>1</sup> Cocooning: “to take vacation or comfort in the solitude one’s own home - in effect wrapping oneself up, away from crowds or busy other places.” <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=cocooning>.

## Please, Don’t Drop In!

Sunday, October 14, 2018

Luke 10:25-37

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

A story from the Internet: One day an older, tired-looking dog wandered into my yard; I could tell from his collar and well-fed belly that he had a home and was well taken care of. He calmly came over to me, I gave him a few pats on his head; he then followed me into my house, slowly walked down the hall, curled up in the corner and fell asleep. An hour later, he went to the door, and I let him out. The next day he was back, greeted me in my yard, walked inside and resumed his spot in the hall and again slept for about an hour. This continued off and on for several weeks.

Curious, I pinned a note to his collar: “I would like to find out who the owner of this wonderful sweet dog is and ask if you are aware that almost every afternoon your dog comes to my house for a nap.” The next day he arrived for his nap, with a different note pinned to his collar: “He lives in a home with six children, two 2 under the age of three and he’s trying to catch up on his sleep. Can I come with him tomorrow?”

I think most of us would be happy to have that dog visit every day, but we might not be so excited about a visit from the dog’s owner. There was a time when such visits were common, and visitors were expected. Neighbors regularly dropped in to check on one another. But the times they are a-changing! While we all want to be good neighbors, the meaning of “neighborliness” is changing as the culture changes from community to cocooning,<sup>1</sup> from country to city, from slow food to fast food, from the dining room to the gaming room. People don’t drop by or drop in like they used to — and, what’s more, we don’t really want them to!

That’s not true everywhere. Take Deer Isle, off the coast of Maine, where it’s still expected that neighbors will make time for house calls, or stop to talk at the post office, or visit in the aisles of The Galley grocer. It’s part of the island charm, but it’s also necessary for survival in this isolated place. Social visiting is how island news travels. Visiting is how islanders find out “right quick” whose house burned down or whose boat sunk in the last nor’easter. It’s how islanders find ways to help each other. In remote places like Deer Isle, neighbors must help neighbors. There’s a saying in Maine that a good tide raises