

Neighbors

Luke 10: 25-37

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It was either the famous Swiss theologian, Karl Barth or the renowned preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick for whom John D. Rockefeller built the Riverside Church in NYC, or maybe both who said: *“The responsibility of a preacher is to step into the pulpit with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.”*

That being true. This story.

As many of you know, I grew up in a small community just outside Pittsburgh, PA. The great, great grandchild of Scottish immigrants who, along with so many of their countrymen and women, made their way from Scotland to Ireland to either to western Pennsylvania to work in the steel mills that lined the Allegheny and the Monongahela Rivers or to Kentucky and southwest Virginia to work in the coal mines of Appalachia. Like all those other waves of immigrants before and after them, among the things they brought with them to their new homes was their religious traditions which, for these Scotch Irish immigrants was Protestant and primarily Presbyterian which is why I am who I am. One example of how this played out in my life is that, even after several generations, as a boy growing up I was not allowed to wear green on St. Patrick’s Day because green was the color worn by Irish Catholics. Irish Protestants wore orange.

I share that with you because if you were to ask me, when I was growing up, who my neighbor was I would have told you to look around me. Everyone I knew was white. Most everyone I knew was Protestant, and probably Presbyterian. I only knew two Roman Catholic families even though there were others in our community. And, St. Scholastica, the Roman Catholic Church in our neighborhood, had a hedge around it taller than I was. I remember walking past the church, looking through the opening for the gate and wondering what was back there behind all those hedges. I had no idea.

Needless to say, growing up I did not know anyone who was Jewish or Muslim or black or Latino. Everyone I knew looked like me.

All that began to change for me when I went to college.

The country was at the tail end of the civil rights movement and in the middle of the anti-Vietnam War movement. The college I attended had a black fraternity and international students. I was aware of them and knew some of them, but none were in my circle of close friends. That is context for this. The summer before my Junior year in college, after failing as a door-to-door salesman for Fuller Brush (Remember them? And, yes. I really did that.), I found a job working for Youth Opportunities Unlimited. A summer day camp program in the part of the

Pittsburgh that went up in flames when the news hit that Martin Luther King, Jr. had been assassinated.

I can't remember how I heard of the program or how I got the job, but there I was. One of a handful of white youth in a community that was nearly 100% black working for an organization focused on providing a safe summer program for African-American children and youth. It was the first time in my life I was the one with the different colored skin. That summer challenged me in many ways and made my world a bit larger and more complicated as I grappled with the question "*Who is my neighbor?*"

After graduating from college I found a job in a state run institution for what we now call those who are developmentally disabled. Then they were called mentally retarded. It was the first time in my life I had been around anyone with that level of disability. I worked on a locked ward with 16 profoundly retarded adults all of whom were bigger and stronger than I was. It was the hardest and most inhumane job I have ever had. Those 16-24 months put me in touch two very different types of individuals. One were those who were seriously trying to make a positive difference in the way our communities and country understood and handled individuals with disabilities. The other were those who were dismissive and often abusive of those who were different and disabled. My world, once again, became a bit larger and a bit more complicated.

A couple years after Shodie and I were married and living in suburban Chicago, a friend stopped by to visit us. For several summers, we had been camp counselors together at a Presbyterian Church camp. As we talked and caught up with each other, he told Shodie and me he was gay. It was the first time someone I knew came out to me. A year or so later a different person made an appointment to see me. He came by my office and asked me to pray over him in order to cast out Satan. He had been taught and told it was Satan who was making him gay. Several years later, when we had just moved to Bedford, a child of the church ask if her relationship to another woman could be acknowledged and blessed. This was before Holy Unions and marriage equality were even on the horizon. When her request became public a number of people left the church and, because I supported her request and said so publically, some walked out the door telling me I was not a Christian and did not deserve to be a minister. And, the question hung in the air for all of us to answer. *Who is my neighbor?*

Then there were the work trips to Appalachia and to Nicaragua with high school students to repair homes or to build homes. And, the conversations with those young adults about how it is possible that there are people in our country who live in homes with no indoor plumbing or in homes with roofs that are caving in or floors that have rotted away. Or, when we were standing in the dirt front yard of Rufina Amaya, the sole survivor of the El Mazote massacre. Do you remember ever hearing about that? Salvadoran troops had received training at the School of the Americas in Georgia, were flown back to El Salvador and then immediately flown to El Mazote where they rounded up everyone in the village, several hundred men, women and children, and massacred them as a message and threat to other communities in an effort to keep them from supporting the rebels who were fighting the dictatorial Salvadoran government. Rufina stumbled and fell as she and others were being rounded up. She lay hidden and listened as her husband

and children and neighbors were shot. Standing in that dirt front yard with us, she talked about what had happened and about the challenge of forgiveness. In a way I had never done before, I grappled with the question *"Who is my neighbor and how large a circle am I willing to draw around my life?"*

I share all that with you because somewhere along the way I also began to take the Bible seriously and to take God seriously and to take Jesus seriously. Not so much as a list of things I am to believe or a creed I am required to say, but as a choice I make about the type of person I want to be and the values around which I wanted to build my life. The seeds for all that were planted by those who were members of the Aspinwall United Presbyterian Church. That all white, very traditional, mostly conservative congregation. And, yet it was in that community of faith that I was encouraged to learn and to memorize Bible verses that somehow stuck with me. Lodged not just in my memory, but also in my heart and soul.

Treat others as you would like to be treated.

Lord, when did we see you hungry.

Whatever you do for one of the least of these.

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God?

Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my thoughts.

See if there is any wicked way in me.

Blessed are the peacemakers.

And, this...

The parable of the Good Samaritan which we heard read a few moments ago.

The lawyer standing up and asking Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life.

The question was not what do he needed to do to get into heaven.

But about what must one do to live a deep and full and meaningful and purposeful life.

The answer given by the lawyer and affirmed by Jesus is clear and was understood by both of them. Two sentences from the heart of Hebrew scripture, one from Deuteronomy and the other from Leviticus, which were understood to sum up the entire Torah and all the the writings of the prophets..

Love God.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

Then the real question.

The hard question.

The question which I think is the the most critical and most important religious question of the day. Not just for Christians, but also for Jews and Muslims and Buddhists and all others. A question I regularly ask high school students as we grapple with the intractable poverty which plagues places like Appalachia or complex geopolitical politics of places like El Salvador or Nicaragua.

Who is my neighbor?

And, how large a circle do we draw around our lives?

And, how do we understand compassion and mercy.

I know there are political responses to this question.
And there are economic responses to this question.
And there are sociological responses to this question.
But here you and I are...
In a church.
Immersed in and surrounded by a Christian liturgy and tradition.
Celebrating World Communion Sunday.
And, from that context the question lingers waiting for our response.

This is where I will leave it.
With that question.
Is the definition of *neighbor* the people of my childhood?
Those who looked like me and went to church with me?
Who had the same background and history as me?
Or is my neighbor those who are black and who lived on the North Side of Pittsburgh or who, in our own community, are sometimes followed around when they walk into a store? Or what about those who are gay or transgender whose desperation leads them to ask me to exorcise the demon from them or worse yet, in despair, take their own lives? Or what about those who are Jewish or Muslim as attacks, both physical and verbal, on them are on the rise? Or those who are mired in poverty in one of wealthiest countries in the world? Or those who have suffered under decades of dictatorships, many of which were supported by our own government, and who long for opportunity and a chance? Whose skin is brown? Whose primary language is Spanish?

As you plunge the depths of your own faith
And allow the the witness of the Bible to rattle around inside your heart, mind and soul.
And as you look at the community in which you live
And the circle you draw around your life
How will you respond to the question asked of Jesus and the story he told?
I believe how we answer the question makes all the difference in the world.