

Who is my neighbor?

Exodus 14:19-31

Luke 10:25-37

September 14, 2014

It's a question of risk versus security; of seeing with the eyes of Christ, or with the eyes of self-preservation. It's that simple.

We gather today in a season of beginnings, a time to think and feel and pray afresh. Those of us beginning school are just starting to know new teachers—or new students. Some are trying to break in to social circles where we have no friends. A new preacher at Emmanuel Friedens church is starting his first September, getting to know the spiritual and personal DNA of a congregation. And this church—two very old churches or one young congregation, depending on the way you look at it—this church stands at a kind of spiritual crossroads. Having come through a season of focusing on our life together, finding a new minister, grieving the past, we emerge in September, wondering what the future of our life together holds.

To what fresh challenges and adventures is Christ calling thee and me, each of us individually, and all of us together? Times of new beginnings can be scary: remember the fear of the children of Israel, perched on the edge of the Red sea waters, during the long night before the wind and the tide swept a muddy path clear.

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Close to the heart of our quest as followers of Jesus is this question: “Who is my neighbor?” In this time of new beginnings, the group that plans your adult church school classes got to thinking we need to spend time with this ancient question, the same one thrown at Jesus by the young whipper snapper scholar of the Torah long ago, as a follow-up of his own faithful biblical and rabbinical summary of the essence of the Holy Law.

This is how the conversation began. “Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.’ And [Jesus] said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’”

Now this would have made a glorious bible passage all by itself—worthy of many a thousand sermon. But the lawyer couldn’t stop there, and so the story continues. *Wanting to justify himself*, the writer tells us, he had to ask the lawyerly follow-up. “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus responded, but not with a definition of who was in and who was out, who was worthy of consideration as a neighbor and who was not. No, he told a story instead, one that has been turning us upside down for two thousand years now, give or take a few. “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho,” he began.

Jesus proceeded to tell this story that cuts close to the bone for every self-justifying religious person—in fact every person, for all time. It’s a simple story really, about an ordinary mugging by the side of an ordinary dangerous road, a road like many throughout the world to this day, and maybe a few streets in our very own town. It’s a story about three people who happen by: two who for the

best of reasons continue on their way, and one, who had even better reasons for continuing, who stopped, and made mercy toward his enemy the order of the day. And at the end of the story, Jesus proceeded to ask: “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

The way we often draw a lesson from this story is this: “Don’t assume that our neighbors are the ones in the inner circle—the person we despise, the person who is invisible to us, the person we think of suspiciously—that’s our neighbor too.” Hey, there’s nothing bad about that reading, as far as it goes.

Only thing is, the usual reading leaves us in the power suit, leaves us in the determining role. That poor guy lying by the road didn’t get to think about it that much. He wasn’t lying there saying “Is this Samaritan morally worthy of being considered my neighbor?” He was glad to get help where it could be got. He didn’t have the luxury of asking the question “Who is worthy to be considered my neighbor,” or not even the pious Christian alternative, “Who is the neediest of the deserving poor that we may demonstrate the love of God?” No, that man had to take what he could get. He knew who was the neighbor to him, by the end of the time of his recovery he did!

When did this happen to you? As we reflect on who has in the past been a neighbor to us, this story turns everything upside down. When you were down and out, and no one would talk to you, who was it saw your need and came to you with some simple gesture? When you were surprised by violence and left for dead, who was there? When you thought you had all the answers and something came along and shook you down to the core of your being, who was a neighbor to you?

It doesn't have to be that obvious either. I am reminded of a story I heard from Henri Nouwen, my mother's friend, as we shared lunch one day in the Yale Divinity School dining hall. Henri, a priest, had just returned from a trip to Guatemala, and I think also El Salvador, during a time of terrible genocidal violence, sponsored by governments which the US government was backing. He was visiting with poor villagers. He had come there thinking he could bring something, some hope, some word of encouragement and love. When he came back, I was sitting with him at table one day as he told us, "I went thinking I could help them. But I couldn't figure out how. I was helpless. What could I do, after all? And when I stayed in the home of a family there in a village I received such love, such forgiveness, that I figured out that I was there not to help them but to be helped by them! Here I thought I had so much to give them. But I gave nothing, and I received everything."

Many of us, particularly those of us used to having some clout, start out in our search for eternal life like that lawyer who went to meet Jesus and ask impossible questions in order to draw him out into self-contradiction! Yet in the midst of the cross-examination we find we really care about the answers to our questions, find that we really want to know! It is dangerous to enter into conversation with Christ, however skeptically! Love has a way of drawing us in. Truth has a way of breaking through our defenses, our fear. And we find rather than being the good neighbor, we have been in the presence of the good neighbor. And it is time to go and learn how to do likewise.

I had my own very brief version of this experience not long ago, preaching in a favela in Northeast Brazil. I was asked to preach to a Wednesday evening service to some of the poorest of the poor. It's a dangerous street, hard to find in

the dark. I've been in a lot of places like that, but I confess, this one still gives me pause. Last time I was there we were careful what we talked about in the open. And that was in mid-afternoon. This time it was Wednesday evening and dark.

We marched into worship a little late, and I hadn't even gotten to the sermon, only playing a little guitar and singing, when it started to happen. The pastor to those people asked us to pray for the people of the USA, particularly the people of Ferguson, Missouri, in one town they had seen on television, where a young man had died of police violence.

These good people, whose own situation was dire, had a broad enough vision of humanity to pray for those suffering far from them. I too needed that prayer, far from Missouri, where my son lives on the other end of the state and works as a school teacher with young black boys and girls in another extremely poor neighborhood.

And then it happened some more. After worship, four teenage boys came up looking at me rather intently. And Odja and Alana Santos, my hosts, mother and daughter, said to me, "The youth say they want to have their picture taken with you." The boys wrapped their arms around my back, these four young men too young to be adults and too exposed to violence and hardship to be children. And I got to pose for the camera, my own cell phone, in kind of a group hug. Now I had not known I needed them. I did not know who would find me in that place. I did not know that it was with the youth group of the Alegria Baptist Church that I would find eternal life. It was as though Jesus were asking me himself. "Who's your neighbor now?" While riots were happening in my own country I was being

embraced by young men in a Brazilian ghetto, embraced by youth with every reason to have only fear and mistrust toward the man.

We begin with fear, or the desire to follow the rules, and someone breaks us out for the sake of love. Again and again, we think we are the actors in the drama of righteousness or salvation, and discover someone else bandaging wounds we did not know we had. Again and again, we think we know what the plan is, where salvation is to be found! It turns out that there is a force more powerful, a love more compelling, a mercy more persistent than any rulebook or moral map.

Friends, when we come to the discussion after church today, as we begin to reflect spiritually, personally and collectively on our own context of neighborhood, here in Schenectady (a name unpronounceable to those Brazilian youth), Schenectady, Nova Lorque, we may have a lot of things to talk about. And I bet Debbie Gehman has great questions to start us out with today. But the first burning question in my mind, for this congregation is “Who do you know, who has been that kind of neighbor to you? Who has embraced you when fear would have been the logical response and apathy the normal one? Who has bound your wounds and paid your bill?

And then there is a second burning question too, a question for me as much as for you. What’s it going to look like, as we go and do likewise? That’s a question for prayer as much as for discussion. It’s a question of risk versus security; of seeing with the eyes of Christ, the eyes of Justice and Love and mercy shared. It’s that simple.