

Who is my neighbor?

Luke 10:25-37

March 3, 2013

(interrupting the reading of the scripture lesson, after verse 28)

Stop!

It should have ended there. It would have been a beautiful thing if the conversation had ended there.

The teacher of the Law came to Jesus with an ulterior motive. He wanted to trap Jesus. He wanted to get Jesus into trouble with his answer to this crucial question: "What must I do to receive eternal life?" He wanted Jesus to "hoist himself on his own petard" by saying something that would sound heretical, even blasphemous, something that would contradict what they, the Jews, had always believed, what their scriptures taught them.

But Jesus didn't fall into the trap. Instead, he turned the question around. What do you think? What do the scriptures say? How do you understand them? And the teacher answered well:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

"You are right," Jesus replied. You are right! I don't have to tell you! You already know what to do to receive eternal life. So do it! Do it and you will live!

Jesus gave the teacher of the Law an honest answer to his dishonest question. Or, better yet, he let the teacher himself give his own honest answer. Jesus let him be the teacher. Jesus let him speak the truth, the truth they all needed to hear, the truth about the way to eternal life. All Jesus added was this: Do it!

It would have been a beautiful thing if the conversation had ended there, but it didn't. He wanted to justify himself. He didn't want it to be that simple. The teacher of the Law wanted to justify his question. He wanted to seem wise and thoughtful and complex, and he wanted to put the onus back on Jesus. He wanted Jesus to have to give an answer. So he asked another question: "Who is my neighbor?"

(worship leader finishes the reading of the scripture lesson)

Who is my neighbor?

It's an awful question! It's an awful question because it assumes you can differentiate, discriminate, between one person who is your neighbor and another who is not. It's an awful question, and Jesus didn't answer it. Instead he told a story ...

There was once a man who was headed at night to Dubuque from Waterloo. Just outside of town, he stopped for a stranded motorist who was waving for help. When he stepped from his car, he was struck in the head from behind and the thieves -- because that is what they were -- the thieves sped off with his car and left him lying at the edge of the road bleeding.

A minister, the minister of the downtown United Church of Christ, was also headed out of town that night and came across the scene. He carefully steered his car into the passing lane and gave whatever it was, or whoever it was, a wide berth, and continued down the highway.

A few minutes later, another minister, a minister of a large African-American congregation, came by. He slowed as he passed to see if he could recognize who it was lying there, but he couldn't, so he went on this way.

An Islamic cleric was headed to his home in Chicago that night, and he too passed the body lying at the side of the road. He pulled over and stopped and his heart was filled with pity. He pulled the turban from his own head and pressed it to the man's wound and wrapped the man's head with it. He did not have a cellphone with him, so he loaded the unconscious man into his car and drove him to the Allen Hospital emergency room. He wrote his address on a piece of paper and told the ER nurses: "I don't know who this man is or what he has for insurance, but here is my address. Please send me the bill for his care."

And Jesus concluded: "In your opinion, which one of these three acted like a neighbor to the man who was carjacked?"

Jesus told a story. He didn't answer the question. Once more, he turned the question around. Once more, he prompted the teacher of the Law to answer his own question, or, more accurately, to answer his own question rephrased. The teacher of the Law had asked: "Who is my neighbor?" But the question Jesus asked him to respond to was this: "Who acted like a neighbor?"

He was trying to justify himself, still trying to get Jesus into trouble, but Jesus gave him yet another chance to leave the gamesmanship behind, to simply acknowledge what God did want him to do, and do it. Jesus did that by way of a story, a story featuring a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan.

The teacher of the Law had asked: "Who is my neighbor?" Priests and Levites and Samaritans could be neighbors. But Jesus portrays them, not as neighbors in need of love, but as the ones given an opportunity to do the loving.

Notice how the focus of the question has changed. Jesus' point is not this: Even Samaritans are your neighbors, too, so you should love them as you love yourself, just as you would show love to your own religious leaders. No, his point is much more startling: You, a Jewish teacher, should love like this Samaritan loved. You go and do what he did.

Jesus' message to us is the same. It is not a question of whether or not we should consider Muslims or gays or liberals or ditto heads or skinheads or crackheads or welfare moms our neighbors deserving of our love. No, the question is not: "Who is my neighbor?" The question is: "Am I ready to be a neighbor?"

Did you notice one very important detail in Jesus' story? Or should I say, missing detail? Who is the one character in his story who is not identified? The victim! Was he a Jew or a Samaritan or a foreigner? Was he rich or poor? Saint or sinner? It doesn't matter!

It doesn't matter. He was hurt. He needed help. He needed a neighbor. The question is not: "Who is my neighbor?" The question is: "Am I ready to be a neighbor?"

We have been talking for three Sundays now about the things we really need to give up for Lent. We need to give up our need to justify ourselves, our need to justify our action, and our inaction, by making distinctions, by differentiating between those who merit our attention and help and love and those who do not.

It's not a question of who. It's a question of you! Are you ready to be a neighbor? Are you ready to love your neighbor, whomever she may be, whatever he may be, just as you love yourself? Do this ... and you will live.