

Doing Likewise

Luke 10:25-37

July 11, 2010

I.

We all probably have a general sense of what it means to be a Good Samaritan. But let's think about it anyway. Perhaps there are some distinctions to be made. I would like to suggest that one of them can involve the distinction between doing something important from the goodness of our hearts, and doing something equally important because it is in our self-interest.

Consider, for example, that we are driving down the highway see someone parked on the side of the road with a flat tire, and we stop and help change it. We would be Good Samaritans.

But what if we were driving on a narrow one lane road, and the car with the flat tire was right in the middle of the road blocking the way leaving no way to pass. Then, perhaps, our assistance might be motivated by our own need to clear the way and get to our destination rather than truly helping the other person. What would we have done if it had been a two lane road?

As another example, there is the story of the woman who pleaded with King Henry VIII to spare her imprisoned husband's life. Henry said the man had confessed, and justice demanded death. The wife said, "I don't ask for justice. I plead for mercy. Henry said that her husband did not deserve mercy. The wife quickly replied, "It would not be mercy if he deserved it."

That persuaded the king, and the man lived. And while history does not remember King Henry VIII as a Good Samaritan, the story makes the point that being a Good Samaritan means helping people we have no obligation to help, whether or not they deserve it.

II.

Today's Gospel is the classic story of the Good Samaritan. It's not only one of the most well known stories in the Bible, but it also has passed into common use in our modern culture.

You could talk to atheists about the importance of being a Good Samaritan, and many would know what it means and agree with you. We have Good Samaritan laws that offer legal protection to strangers who give assistance to others in emergencies. Hospitals 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 fully understood. Perhaps that's because it involved a lawyer whose question led Jesus in one direction, but Jesus' answer went in another. Therefore the message is not in the question, but rather in the response.

More specifically, many people think the question raised by this story is "who is my neighbor," and 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 more closely, we see that the story is not about what people are, but rather how we treat them. It is not about what we think, but rather what we do.

III.

Today's reading has two principal parts. Let's pick it up where Jesus confirmed that we must love our neighbors as ourselves, and the lawyer basically said, "OK, so who is my neighbor?" Jesus, however, did not answer that question, but rather told our story about the man who was beaten and robbed, and the Samaritan who cared for him after others had passed by.

Then Jesus asked who was the neighbor to the injured man, and the lawyer said it was the person who stopped to help. And Jesus said, "Go and do likewise."

And note here that Jesus asked who was a 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.

So, this reading does not mean that everyone is our neighbor. Instead the point is that those who reach out to others when they could do otherwise are the people who love others as themselves. They are the good neighbors. The test is not who is, but who does.

The second important part of the reading is that the person who offered help was a Samaritan. In Jesus' time Samaritans and Jews were somewhat like Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq today. Although they shared a common faith and worshipped from the same Scriptures, they also shared an historic animosity. Jews believed that Samaritans were 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, he also made the point that for purposes of being a good neighbor, social and cultural distinctions did not count, and stereotypes meant nothing. His message was that people are called to help others in need irrespective of the differences between them.

IV.

So, how do we apply these lessons to our own lives today? Who are we supposed to help? How do we do it? And what does loving our neighbor really mean?

Obviously, just by watching the news we can see more pain and suffering in this world than we ever could eliminate on our own. There are so many needy people in the world that even thinking about helping can be overwhelming. It can be difficult at times to know what God wants us to do or where God wants us to start.

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

Paul said in Romans (12:13) to extend hospitality to strangers, and told Timothy and Titus, as church leaders, to be faithful in practicing hospitality. (1 Ti. 3:2, Tit. 1:8). Peter said to be hospitable without complaining (1 Pe. 4:9). And in the Book of Hebrews (13:2) we are 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, or being nice to a circle of carefully chosen guests. It is not defined by 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 situations, and I don't expect us to take him that way, although he was making an important point. His message for today is 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.

I have illustrated this point before by describing a well-known study in 1973 by two behavioral scientists, J.M. Darley and C.D. Batson. It was based on two groups of seminarians at Princeton Theological Seminary who were told they were participating in a study of how quickly they could think on their feet as they prepared their sermons.

The experiment began when both groups, in two different classrooms, were instructed to leave immediately for the campus recording studio, which was on the other side of campus, and to extemporaneously record a sermon on the story of the Good Samaritan. One group, however, was 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 on which the seminarians would be walking to get to the recording studio, and this other student was slumped on the ground 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 finish 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 unduly critical of the seminarians in a hurry who passed on by. What would I have done in similar circumstances. 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 the right thing to do does not mean that we actually will do it. Our instincts and reflexes sometimes don't work that way. And our sense of self-interest can take over. Therefore 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 are not literal neighbors in the conventional sense. The Spirit places people in our paths as we hurry on our way, and calls us to stop and minister to them.

V.

And 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 through our work at St. Thomas.

And this need to actually do things is made clear in the New Testament 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 point is that good wishes sometimes are not enough.

And that is today's Gospel. It's 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. We are doing a lot now. But peoples' needs still are here, and I pray that we can continue to be good neighbors. *Amen.*