



One of the first lessons you learn as a baby lawyer is **never, never** ask a question to which you do not already know the answer. Apparently the lawyer in the passage from Luke didn't get that message because he asks Jesus "And who is my neighbor?" Now we're also told the lawyer asked that question because he wanted to justify himself- and pride will do you in almost every time.

I imagine Jesus had to swallow a smile as he inwardly thanked that lawyer for being the perfect set-up to the message Jesus wanted to get across. A message that expanded upon traditional Jewish thought or at least caused a new examination of traditional thought about who was neighbor and what my response to neighbor is in light of my love for God.

The lawyer rightly recited what we call the two great commandments:

- love God
- love neighbor.

So what's behind the need to justify himself such that the question to Jesus is "and who is my neighbor"? After all this can't have been the first time a Jewish rabbi or teacher or scholar was asked that question.

In typical fashion, Jesus does not answer the question but rather tells a story. A story that helps us come to the answer because we can put ourselves in the story as one or more of the characters - and probably at some point in your life, you've been each of the characters. The story is familiar to us if we've been coming to church as every three years our lectionary includes these scripture passages.

Sometimes, the very familiarity of the scripture can make it hard for us to see something new that speaks to us where we are today- which may be a very different place in our life from where we were 3 years ago when this passage was last read. Hopefully, when we hear familiar stories over and over again through the years, we are willing to continue to dig deeper into the meaning.

On Tuesday morning, some of us gather to consider the lessons for the upcoming Sunday. And in our conversation, the questions began to flow- new questions as well as old questions. What does

it mean that the Samaritan looked upon the man with pity? Was the Samaritan judging, in a negative way, the beaten man – or is pity, in this translation really a synonym for compassion?

What would it take for us to trust an inn keeper to give a full and fair accounting of monies spent to help someone like the beaten man? Would we even think about doing what the Samaritan did?

Why do we so often give and then expect an accounting- our hands held tight to money? Some of you have received solicitations from this or that charity and in the solicitation letter you might read that with your donation of “x” dollars, the charity can do “y.” We choose, in part, to contribute to a charity based upon what we perceive to be the value of the work that is being done. We want an accounting and we make judgments.

If we give believing that all we have comes from God and what we are doing with our monetary gifts is giving back to God a portion of what God has given to us, does that change how we make decisions about what we give? Should it change how we give and what we give?

The questions continued on Tuesday morning. The questions highlighted how the Word of God, revealed through Scripture, is alive and well in the 21st century and in Crawfordsville, Indiana. I’ve never quite understood those who say scripture needs no interpretation- as our conversation on Tuesday highlighted once again the depth of riches found when we will stop and think a bit deeper about what is before us.

And what is mercy that the lawyer responds to Jesus’ question: “Which of these three do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers” with “the one who showed him mercy”. At least one dictionary definition of mercy is compassion or forgiveness. Since at least one dictionary definition of pity is also compassion, they are tied together and yet when we hear the words pity and mercy we usually think they are quite different, I suspect.

You may have heard the phrase: to have a good neighbor, you must first be one. The Samaritan acted- he gave meaning to this phrase. No judgment or concern about why the man had been beaten and left lying in a ditch. Rather, he saw what was needed and he was willing to do it.

When I was growing up, I remember a plumb line being used to help us know where to paste the wallpaper strips so that when the job was done, all the strips had been pasted correctly- the edges matched and the designs weren’t crooked. To use a plumb line, you chalked the string and then stood on a ladder so you could reach the ceiling, and then let the line hang down. A metal weight at the bottom of the string made sure the string fell straight. When all was in place, you pulled the string and then let it go so the chalk would make a mark on the wall. This gave you the straight vertical line that you needed. The chalk line made with the plumb helped you see that what your eye perceived as a straight wall might not be fact be straight.

That's part of what is going on in the reading from Amos. The plumb line shows how far off center the people have become. The plumb line marks where they should be if they would follow God with all their hearts and minds and souls and if they would love neighbor as self. We know what to do – what it means to see and respond to the plumb line. We do not always want to do it, however, particularly when there is nothing for us to gain by acknowledging “that man” as our neighbor. We do not always want to give to God a portion of what is given to us when there is nothing in it for us in a worldly sense.

We are, too often, the priest and the Levite who walk past “that man” because we are afraid of getting out of our comfort zone or because we see no benefit from helping “that man.” Or we walk by because we are busy or preoccupied with the next item on our calendar. Someone else, we think, will surely stop and help “that man.” Or even worse, we don't even see “that man” perhaps because we have become inured to those around us who need help. The need is so great and we feel so overwhelmed that we do nothing – not even what we could do.

I received an email earlier this week with a series of photos and comments about gratitude. One that particularly stuck with me was a photo of a mother and a father kissing their dying baby goodbye. The next photo was of a line of medical personnel bowing to the child. The question was “why are these medical personnel bowing to this dying child.” The answer: because the parents had agreed to donate the liver and kidneys of their dying child enabling two other desperately ill children to receive transplants. Generosity. Gratitude. Loving neighbor as self.

There was nothing in that donation for the parents. Their child was dying and there was no hope of recovery. Out of love, they enabled two other children to live.

Were those parents Christian? I don't know. It really doesn't matter. What matters is that there was a need and they were willing to meet that need as they were uniquely able to do at that moment and in that place. They loved their neighbor, expecting nothing in return. They found a way to bless someone else even as they faced devastating loss. And although I do not know this, I suspect that the act of donating a liver and kidney from their dying child to enable two other children to live was in line with their beliefs- if you will, they saw the plumb line and followed it.

Familiar stories, yes. New understandings, I hope so.

Who is your neighbor, Jesus asks. The one who needs mercy- the one who needs your compassion not your judgment. The one who needs your action not your passing by. We know what to do- we have to have the will to do it. The answer of Jesus to the lawyer is the answer we are given: Who was the neighbor? The one who showed mercy. Go and do likewise. *Amen.*

8 Pentecost; Proper 10
Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

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