

## Who Has Been A Neighbor To You?

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost; Series C

Luke 10:25-37

Sometimes stories can function as mirrors. We look into a mirror and we see a reflection of ourselves. The mirror tells you something about yourself. Stories can function that way. A few weeks ago during our Sunday Morning Divine Service we heard the Old Testament story of the Prophet, Nathan, rebuking the King David. The Prophet was tasked with the daring and courageous responsibility of bringing the King himself to see his great offense in committing adultery with Bathsheba, impregnating her, and trying to cover it up with the murder of her husband, Uriah the Hittite. In his attempt to show David how he had sinned against God and against his neighbor, Nathan told a story.

The Prophet Nathan told a story about a rich man who had many flocks and herds but the poor man who had nothing but one little lamb. The rich man had a traveler for whom he needed to provide hospitality. Unwilling to take any one of his own flock or herd to prepare for his guest, the rich man decided instead to steal. He went and took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come (2 Samuel 12:1-6).

The story is familiar to most of us. And it was told with great success on the part of Nathan, the prophet. The story brought about the intended result. Upon hearing the story David said with outrage, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity" (2 Samuel 12:6)! Nathan was then able to say to David, "You are the man" (2 Samuel 12:7)! David was caught and just a short story was the "net" used to catch him.

Sometimes stories can function as mirrors. We heard another very common story this morning that Jesus once told a Lawyer. It is the story or parable of the Good Samaritan. And Jesus uses this story as a mirror to show the Lawyer something about himself.

Admittedly, most people don't recognize this story as a mirror that shows them something about themselves. Often times this story is used as a model or an example. See the great compassion of the Samaritan in comparison to the other two, the Priest and the Levite! See how much he cares! We might lift this story up as a model or an example, much like a manikin or a supermodel is used. We might use the story to "show off" the ideal person, situation, or behavior and then say, "Go, do likewise!" I would like to suggest that this story is so much more.

Certainly we are called to show compassion. We are called to "love our neighbor as ourselves" by identifying their needs and meeting them. We here at Atonement have been finding ways to do this through donations to the Food Pantry. We have been finding ways to reach out to our neighbors—the ones who are near and close to us—through Vacation Bible School. Jesus himself urges the Lawyer at the end of the story to "Go and do likewise." Yet, if we treat the story of the Good Samaritan *only* or *primarily* as a model or an example of how we ought to be a neighbor, then we *reduce* the story simply to a moral message. It is then *only* a direct answer to the question that the Lawyer first asks Jesus, "What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?" The story becomes about what *we do* to and for those around us *in order* to inherit eternal life. The neighbor then is turned into an *object* or a *thing* that we use for our own personal purposes.

This story of the Good Samaritan also serves as a mirror. Like a mirror gives us a reflection of ourselves, this story tells us something about ourselves. When we hear this story, we should not first and foremost be asking, "Who is my neighbor?" Rather, we should be asking, "Who has been neighbor to me?" This is why Jesus told story to the Lawyer in the first place.

The Lawyer approaches Jesus on the basis of the Law or the Ten Commandments. He wants to know *what he must do* in order to inherit eternal life. Out of love and compassion and a desire to be a good neighbor to the man, Jesus tells him the story of the Good Samaritan. He attempts to get the man to realize that he cannot approach God on the basis of the Law or the Ten Commandments. *He cannot do* enough to earn God's eternal favor. The Lawyer's question *should* probably have been something along these lines, "How does God save someone like me?" How does God save someone like you? How does God save someone who cannot always love him with all his or her heart, soul, mind, and strength and love his or her neighbor as themselves?

However, the man continues to seek eternal life and justification with God on the basis of the Law, and so he asks, "Who is my neighbor?" He wants to measure his effectiveness at obeying the Ten Commandments and evaluate his performance on the basis of the Law. And so Jesus shows him a mirror by telling him a story. Like Nathan's purpose for telling King David a story about sheep, Jesus is searching for a response such as this: "I am not that neighbor!" And like David, upon realizing the great Sin and offense he had committed against God and against his neighbor confessed it to God and called out for forgiveness, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan to bring not just the Lawyer, but you and me and all people to plead for God to be a neighbor to us!

In the Story of the Good Samaritan each of the three characters *see* this victim lying on the side of the steep, rocky twenty mile road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The Priest went down the road, saw, and passed by on the other side, concerned about being rendered unclean by dealing with the dead. The Levite did a little more. He saw and went to the place, checked it out, and then decided to go on the other side. Yet, the Samaritan saw, went directly to the person, and got involved.

Brothers and sisters in Christ. Let us face the sobering truth. You and I are not *that* neighbor. We are measured up against the demands of God's Law, his ten commandments, and we have fallen short. But God sent one to be neighbor to you and for you. God sent one to go personally to each one of you and get involved. Like that man on the side of the road, your Sin and rebellion and great offense against God has robbed and plundered you and left you to die—a spiritual death. This is why we need our Lord Jesus to come to each of us and to get involved in a personal way.

It began in the Baptismal font. God bound up the wounds of Sin and poured in the healing balm of forgiveness and compassion. God brought you to an inn, the Church, where you are called and kept in the true faith. Here you continually receive the medicine of immortality that you need. You receive the traveling food of his body and blood in the bread and the wine. You are then empowered by his Spirit to "go and do likewise." You are empowered to bear one another's burdens. You are empowered for service. You are to roll up our sleeves and get involved. You have neighbors that need you to "be a neighbor to them." You are raised as a new creation by the grace of God not to be "down the road" or "to the place" people. We are raised to new life in order to be "to the person people." We are called to show the compassion and mercy of Christ to others by going near, close by, getting involved, just as it has been done for us. Let us find ways to do this in our homes and here in the community around this Church—"Go and do likewise." Now you are free to be! Amen.