

LISTEN, AGAIN

They say “familiarity breeds contempt.” And so it sometimes does. But more often familiarity breeds indifference. How often, for instance, have you heard the flight attendant’s spiel about seatbelts and oxygen masks? Do you really listen anymore? Probably not, you are familiar with it to the point of indifference. “I know what she’s going to say, why should I listen?” How often have you prayed the Lord’s Prayer or sung the Doxology without really paying attention. Familiarity breeds indifference.

So it is with the Parable of the Good Samaritan. You’ve probably heard it since childhood. If you grew up in the church, you’ve probably acted it out in some church school or youth group sketch where the Samaritan becomes a biker or a black man or maybe a gay guy. You know this story inside out, or so you think.

But the truth is, like most any part of scripture, if we really willing to set aside our preconceived ideas, if we are willing to let go of the notion that we already know the punch line, this parable has much to teach is. But only if you are willing to, listen again. So let’s review the basics.

First, this is not a stand alone story. Luke clearly places it in the context of a theological debate. Jesus is teaching the crowds, when a scribe, a lawyer if you will, stands up to ask a question. He is one well versed in the Mosaic Law, well versed in the scriptures. “What must I do,” he asks, “to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus, like any good rabbi, points to the Bible: “What does the law say about it?”

The lawyer offers up two verses, one from Deuteronomy, the other from Leviticus: “Love God,” he says, “and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Note, both of these require action. They are not mere doctrinal affirmations. To inherit eternal life, one must love God, love neighbor, love self.

The lawyer knows the right answer. He has offered up the correct theological response. And Jesus applauds that response. But then he takes it a step further. For it is not merely a matter of knowing the right thing, rather it’s about doing the right thing.

“You have given the right answer,” he says, “*do* this and you will live.” (Luke 10:28)

Don’t just know it. Don’t just believe it. Do it. As one scholar notes: “The lawyer has read well, but reading is not enough Eternal life is not found in knowing the commandments, but in doing them.” (R. Alan Culpepper, *New Interpreters Bible*, IX: 228)

The lawyer, though, isn't interested in changing how he lives; he's only concerned about knowing the right answers. So he pushes the point a bit further. Instead of going out and loving his neighbor, he wants clarification: "Who is my neighbor?"

Robert McAfee Brown writes: "By asking the question that way the lawyer gets the discussion back onto safe territory. The discussion need not involve being a neighbor but only defining a neighbor." (*Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes*, 107)

The lawyer thought that by defining the word neighbor he would limit the scope of his responsibility. But Jesus doesn't answer his question with a simple definition. Rather, he tells a story, a story that blows apart any notion that the word neighbor can be narrowly defined. In fact, his story makes it clear that one's neighbor can be anybody—anybody at all!

You know it well. Too well, perhaps. An unnamed man, presumably a good Jew, is traveling down the Jericho road on the way to Jerusalem. It's a dangerous road. Full of twists and turns and those who would do him harm. He's waylaid by thieves and beaten up. He's left for dead. Two men, first a priest and then a Levite, are hurrying to Jerusalem to engage in the rituals of worship at the Temple. They are required to be ceremonially clean to do so. If they touch a dead man, they are considered unclean, and cannot perform their religious duties. So, thinking the wounded traveler dead, they pass on by.

But a Samaritan, one of the Jews archenemies, stops and helps him out. And that, presumably, is just fine with the man who was beaten up! Even though Samaritans were considered ritually unclean, even though coming in contact with the Samaritan leave the traveler unclean, he is more than willing to accept his help. It saves his life. Rather red than dead, so to speak.

Jesus ends his story, and then poses a question: "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" (Luke 10:36)

The lawyer wanted a definition of the word neighbor. He wanted limits on his responsibility towards his fellow human beings. But Jesus isn't one to be tied down!

As New Testament scholar Alan Culpepper writes: "Jesus has turned the issue from the boundaries of required neighborliness to the essential nature of neighborliness. Neighbors are defined actively, not passively." Then, in an ironic twist, he quotes an Arab proverb: "To have a good neighbor you must be a one." (Ibid, 230)

Eugene Peterson tells a story about a brief time when he and his wife were living in Pittsburgh. They still didn't know the city very well, and Pittsburgh is a rather confusing place. If you've never been there, it's built on several hills, and streets and roadways often make wide turns, and rarely end up where you think they should. It was also a time of great racial tension in Pittsburgh. The city was ripe for violence.

One Sunday Peterson and his wife decided to visit a church being pastored by a friend. They didn't have specific directions, but Peterson was sure he could find his way. (OK, OK, all you women are saying "I've heard that song before!" And so you probably have.)

Of course, you know where this is going—they got lost. Badly lost. In fact they found themselves in the middle of one of the worst neighborhoods in Pittsburgh. Just the week before two people had been murdered on the very street they were on.

Setting aside male ego, Peterson decided to stop and ask directions—but he couldn't spot anybody. He saw a few folks walking to church, but they were intent on getting to worship. He was about to give up when he came to a saloon. There sitting on the porch, were three disheveled looking guys, waiting for the doors to open so that they could get their first drink of the day.

Undeterred, Peterson stopped and asked them how to get to the church. They huddled and clearly couldn't come to an agreement about the right way to go, when suddenly, one of them decided to take matters into his own hands. Peterson writes: "[He] jumped into his car, an old battered Cadillac, and called out, 'Follow me.' The other two tumbled into the back seat. . . . He drove fast and erratically. . . . He turned left, and right and then left again. A confusing zigzag. . . ."

The Petersons began to wonder if they were being led into a trap—some dead-end alley where they'd be cornered and then robbed—after all Pittsburgh was, at the time, the car theft capital of North America!

"Suddenly," writes Peterson, "the driver pulled to the curb, stepped out of his car and, with a sweeping gesture, directed us to the ramp of the bridge that would take us across the river and to our church."

"We wanted to stop and thank him, but we were swept into the traffic; his image in the rearview mirror was soon gone."

Which of these were neighbors to the Petersons? The folks headed to church, or the guys waiting for an eye opener?

"It took us a matter of seconds," writes Peterson, "to realize what had happened—we had been 'taken on' by a good Samaritan. Three Samaritans in fact—unkempt, unlikely Samaritans who were waiting for the saloon to open on a Sunday morning." ("Three Samaritans," *The Christian Century*, July 29-August 5, 1998, 725)

Being a good neighbor has nothing to do with static labels based on class or race or age or sexual orientation. Being a good neighbor is all about action. It is all about how you live your life. It is all about how you treat the other guy—regardless of who he is. It's about giving and

receiving help is an open and accepting manner. It means setting aside preconceived ideas and living into the reality of life.

A neighbor might be Christian, Samaritan, Jew or Muslim. A neighbor might be young or old or somewhere in between. A neighbor might be rich or poor or simply struggling to get by. A neighbor may even be the person who lives next door.

Donna Schaper tells about moving into a new house that had a beautiful perennial garden.

One day, as she was working in the garden early in the morning, she noticed, out of the corner of her eye, someone bringing a wheelbarrow into her yard. When she looked up, she saw that her next-door neighbor was digging up lupine.

Schaper hadn't met her new neighbor, so she stood up and walked over to her and introduced herself. She hoped to find out what was going on.

"Hello," she said, "I'm the new owner [of this house]."

The neighbor began to blush, having been caught red-handed with taking the lupine. She quickly explained that the previous owner had encouraged her to take some of the plants.

Schaper thought about it a moment, and then said: "Don't worry, let's dig you some more. I need neighbors more than I need lupine." (*Calmly Plotting the Resurrection*, 16)

Maybe, just maybe, Israelis and Palestinians need neighbors more than they need land. Maybe, just maybe, Shi'ites and Sunnis need neighbors more than they need power. Maybe management and labor need neighbors more than they need an upper hand. Maybe liberals and conservatives need neighbors more than they need to be right.

So who is your neighbor? Who do you need more than land or power or money? Who do you need more than a sense of being right? Who is your neighbor?

He may be a Samaritan trying to help. She may be someone held up by thieves. He may be an old drunkard waiting for a drink. She may be the one taking lupine from your yard.

Your neighbor may be, can be, most anyone. And if you want eternal life, Jesus says, love God, love neighbor, love yourself. No theological qualifiers. No sociological limits. No boundaries of race or creed or gender or age.

Love God, love your neighbor, love yourself. Period.

Amen
John H. Danner

