

A Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost 2014 Proper 25A  
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With today's gospel reading, the long debate between Jesus and the leaders of his religious community that has been unfolding in Matthew's gospel that we have been reading for the last several weeks comes to an end with the assertion that after this no one dared to ask Jesus any more questions. As a former school teacher and especially as a parent, I confess that I have sometimes wished for the same power.

The debate ends with what is probably the second most famous saying of Jesus, after the one from John's gospel that begins "for God so loved the world..."

This other famous saying, the one our prayer book calls the summary of the law, occurs in all three of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, with Mark's version almost identical to the one we read today, but with a rather different telling in Luke.

Luke's version also has a temple leader, a lawyer, though of biblical law, not civil, testing Jesus, but in Luke it is Jesus asking his tester which is the most important commandment. The lawyer, who knows his scripture pretty darned well, summarizes the answer scripture provides in pretty much the same way that Jesus himself does in the Matthew and Mark: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus tells this lawyer he gets full marks for his answer, but then the lawyer goes on to ask Jesus the question that is really at the heart of Christian living, and that still troubles us even to this day: “And who is my neighbor?” To which Jesus replies with the famous story of the neighborly Samaritan and the un-neighborly Priest and Levite. You all know that story. The outcast Samaritan, unlike the religious insiders, goes out of his way to help a stranger in need, a man robbed, beaten, and left for dead in a ditch, and Jesus then asks which of the characters in the story treated that stranger like a neighbor.

And that little story, with its new definition of what it means to be a neighbor, changes everything.

To understand just how radical that new idea of neighborliness is, you really need to understand a little bit about the purity codes that the temple leaders who are challenging Jesus, and the un-neighborly temple leaders in the story of the Good Samaritan, and indeed all faithful Jews lived by, and you need to know about the relationship between the Jewish people of Judea and the people of the neighboring country of Samaria.

The purity code that is found in the Hebrew Bible identifies many ways of making oneself ritually impure – actions which would make it impossible to enter the Temple or otherwise petition God or interact with your community until going

through a set of elaborate purification rites. And two of the ways one could make oneself unclean were to touch a corpse or to touch an unclean person.

And Samaritans, to Jesus' people, were just about as unclean as a person could get.

The Samaritans were the descendants of a handful of poor Jews who had been left in the area north of Palestine when most of the Jews had been carried off into exile and slavery. This tiny remnant had survived by intermarrying with other tribes in the area (another way of making yourself ritually unclean), and their interpretation of scripture led them to worship God in a different place and in a different way than was done in the Temple in Jerusalem. And as we Episcopalians well know, there is little that divides people so thoroughly as differences of opinion about how to interpret scripture and how to worship.

So faithful Jews hated the Samaritans. They were far worse than the gentile tribes with whom they shared their Palestinian homeland, for they were considered to be traitors to their people and God's law. Jews would actually walk miles out of their way, repeatedly crossing the river, if necessary, to avoid even setting foot in Samaritan lands.

So, while the temple leaders would have understood, if not applauded the Priest and Levite staying as far away as they could from the beaten and abandoned man who appeared to be a corpse, the idea that the hero of this story was a Samaritan would have utterly shocked them. Not just because Samaritans were the

untouchables of their world, but because, with the Samaritan as the hero, the story suggests that the way to follow the law is to break the law. If the Samaritan is the true neighbor of the Jewish man in the ditch, then loving your neighbor utterly trashes the purity code which shaped the temple leaders' lives, for it requires you to cross all manner of purity boundaries which divide you from your neighbor in order to love and serve.

And with this little story redefining who is our neighbor, Jesus presents such an expansive view of who we are bound to serve as neighbors that it continues to challenge us today, even if we do not feel bound by the purity laws of the Hebrew Bible.

At first hearing, the story seems to suggest that a neighbor is anyone in need. The Samaritan, the outcast, is neighbor to the man in the ditch because he, without thought of cost to himself, sees his need and responds to it. And helping those in need is certainly part of what Jesus is challenging his hearers, and us, to do. But Jesus is not just challenging us to serve the stranger. The faithful ones of Jesus' own community, the Priest and the Levite of the Good Samaritan story, who were of the same community as the man in the ditch, have failed the test of neighborliness, not by failing to help a stranger, but by failing to help one of their own.

Even as Jesus is expanding the bounds of neighborly love to include strangers, outcasts, foreigners, and sinners, he is reminding us that we are bound to love those who are near to us as well – the people with whom we share a block, a community, a church, a faith.

And, sad to say, there's a lot of failure to love our neighbors going on these days.

Many Christians, have been finding it difficult if not impossible to love those with whom we disagree.

That we disagree about how to live into the vision of the reign of God that scripture holds for us isn't the problem; that we cannot live in neighborly love with those with whom we disagree most certainly is.

And the problem may be even worse outside the church. Every day, it seems, Americans grow less able to listen to, accept, or even tolerate those with whom we disagree. We must, Jesus insists, learn to love those who are different, and those with whom we differ.

We are surrounded by neighbors. The people in our church with whom we disagree, as well as those we like, are our neighbors. The people who live around us who do not share our culture or our values, as well as those who are like us, are our neighbors. The next generation, those young whippersnappers whom we neither understand nor approve of, and who likely feel the same way about us, are

our neighbors. And those in need, whether friend or stranger, whether nearby or in distant places, are most certainly our neighbors.

And the challenge of the Gospel, the imperative of the reign of God, is not just to serve our neighbors, not just to heal and house and feed them in their need, but to love them as well. And not to love them in an abstract, “having kind thoughts about people you don’t know” kind of way, but with a love that is deep and personal, a love that invites them into our hearts and into our lives – to love them, in short, as we love ourselves, and, indeed, as God loves us.

Amen.