

Date: July 15, 2007

SUNDAY: Ordinary 15

SERMON: There Goes the Neighborhood!

Text(s): Amos 7:7-17; Luke 10:25-37

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Moving to a new neighborhood is rarely an easy experience. It's better, perhaps, if a lot of others are moving in at about the same time, for example in a new housing development. All your neighbors are new too, so there's a certain fluidity in relationships between neighbors that just goes with the territory. But if you move into a neighborhood that's already well-established, and you're the only "new kid on the block," then as you know, it usually takes some time to develop relationships that ultimately become friendships, and sometimes, friendship never really happens at all. I'm sure most of us have a story or two about neighbors who have made a real difference in our lives—for good or bad.

When we returned to the U.S. from Malaysia back in 1980, I was appointed to a church in a small New Jersey town that was one of the oldest towns in the Mid-Atlantic region. Bordentown was founded in 1682, the same year as Philadelphia, and was home to one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, as well as the revolutionary Thomas Paine, who was buried in the Episcopal cemetery there. In other words, we really were the new kids on the block. The majority of our neighbors, if they hadn't been born and raised in Bordentown, had lived there for a long time, and were already deeply embedded and connected in their social networks.

Across the street lived a couple who were the slightly older than the ages of our parents. Bill was the senior attorney in Burlington County, his father had been a judge, and both he and his wife Margaret had deep, deep family roots there. When we moved there, Margaret was in her next-to-last year of teaching first grade. She had taught nearly everyone in the town, including their children and sometimes even their grandchildren.

It was during the Christmas school holidays that we moved in, just a few days before New Year. We had hardly unpacked our suitcases when we got a knock on our door one afternoon, and there was this stranger on our front porch. She said, "Hi, my name is Margaret, and I've come to welcome you, and particularly your daughter Katie, to the neighborhood." Turns out, Katie was going to be placed in her first-grade class, and we didn't even know that yet.

Well, to make a very long story very short, that was the beginning of a relationship that quickly blossomed into a deep and life-long friendship, that involved not only Margaret and Bill, but their two daughters and their families, and two other couples on our block and their families that continues to this day, even though Margaret and Bill themselves are gone now. In fact, in August, I'll be traveling over to Burlington, Vermont to officiate at the wedding of one of Margaret and Bill's granddaughters who has been like a cousin to our own kids all these years. Sometimes, you really just get very lucky with neighbors. Or, perhaps, it was just that Margaret and Bill knew how to be neighbors in ways that are increasingly rare in our society.

Certainly the Samaritan in the parable Jesus told in our gospel lesson wasn't so fortunate, at least not at first. This story is probably one of the most familiar and most beloved stories in the Bible. It's not only one that every child who goes to Sunday School has heard dozens of times by the time he or she has grown to adulthood; it's also a story that has been beloved by artists down through the centuries as well. And just because it is so familiar, and so beloved, we don't even hear it anymore as the scandalous, shocking, and utterly offensive story that it was for its original hearers.

To begin to appreciate how much impact this story would have had on its original hearers, we have to first understand something about the situation of those hearers, and the assumptions about neighbors and neighborliness that they held. The notion that one had a God-given duty

to love one's neighbor was not a new or radical idea. The scriptures of Judaism clearly commanded love of one's neighbor. The rabbis before Jesus' time, as well as Jesus and St. Paul and others frequently offered as a summary of the entire Mosaic law, the dual command to love God with all one's being and to love one's neighbor as oneself. In fact, a century or so before Jesus, the great rabbi Hillel was challenged by one of his students to recite the whole law of God while standing on one foot. Hillel immediately lifted one foot from the ground and said, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. This is the whole of the Torah; all the rest is commentary.*" In this story of Jesus' confrontation with a scholar of religious law who tries to test his orthodoxy, it is the lawyer himself who cites this well-known and accepted summary of the law, and Jesus affirms that he has indeed understood the law correctly.

Yet, as this expert on religious law knew very well, the definition of who was a neighbor did not mean just anyone who happened to live nearby. The neighborhood had very tightly defined boundaries. One's neighbor was one who shared Abraham as one's ancestor, and who worshiped the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and who bound himself to Israel's covenant with this God. In other words, only other Jews met the criteria for being one to whom neighborliness was owed.

Now the lawyer's question to Jesus becomes easier to see for the crafty legal nit-picking question that it is. "*And who is my neighbor?*" he asks, apparently in all innocence. In reality, there's nothing innocent about this question. It's a trap, and he and Jesus and everyone else who's listening knows it's a trap. But none of them are prepared for Jesus to walk into that trap deliberately, with eyes wide open, and then turn it around and use it to trap his listeners instead.

The artistry of this story is such that his

listeners don't even see what's coming. "*A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers who stripped him and beat him and went away leaving him half dead.*" Well, who doesn't like a good crime story? I'm not going to ask how many of us watch CSI or Law & Order. It would be too embarrassing, especially for me. Everybody likes the story of a good mugging— except the person who's getting mugged, of course.

All of Jesus' listeners knew about the dangers of the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. There were lots of narrow places where the road is hemmed in between rock walls on either side— lots of good hiding places for robbers, and they were probably thinking to themselves what a schmuck this guy was to have been traveling that road alone. They would have known better. They would have known to travel in a group large enough to discourage bandits from attacking them. You didn't go down that road alone if you valued your health.

Jesus doesn't rush the story. He continues to build his audience's empathy and participation. A priest from the temple in Jerusalem also happened to be going down the road that day, says Jesus, and when he saw the man who had been robbed and beaten lying in the ditch, he passed by on the other side because he was on important church business. With all the knowledge we have of hypocrisy or abuse among clergy these days, it probably doesn't come as any surprise to us, nor even to Jesus' listeners, that this priest has no compassion for the man in the ditch.

And the same goes for the Levite, who's the next person to come along and see the man who's been robbed, and who is too busy to stop and help. Levites were not really priests, but they assisted in the worship at the temple; let's call them Deacons, or members of the Church Council. Anyway, they're part of that crowd of religious hypocrites that unbelievers are always saying that the church is full of, and offering that

fact as the reason why they don't go to church. And, of course, they're right; the church is full of hypocrites, isn't it— after all, we're here, aren't we? Don't most of us want to be seen by others as better people than we know we really are? Right on, Jesus! Give it to those hypocrites.

But only now, when his audience is “eating out of his hand,” so to speak, does Jesus drop a bomb on his listeners.

“*But a Samaritan, while traveling, came near him, and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion.*” Perhaps the only way for us to appreciate the shock-value of this statement, would be to try to think of a modern-day equivalent. Imagine that the person in the ditch is a white man with real racist attitudes, perhaps a member of the Ku Klux Klan, from say, Lewiston. Now imagine that the Samaritan is a member of the Somali community in Lewiston whom the man in the ditch fought so hard to keep out. Or perhaps the man in the ditch is a well-to-do retiree who lives in a gated community in Florida built around a golf course, and the Samaritan is an illegal Mexican immigrant who is the greenskeeper for the golf club. Or the person in the ditch is a liberated, liberal woman and the Samaritan is a very traditional Muslim man of Arab descent has recently moved into the neighborhood and whose wife only appears fully covered in a *burqa*. Are we beginning to get the picture?

In Jesus' day, it was Jews and Samaritans. Samaritans were despised by the Jews for two reasons; first, they were ethnic mongrels— a race of half-breeds resulting from the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel some seven centuries earlier.

In the second place they practiced a half-breed religion as well. They had adopted religious beliefs and practices that were as culturally-mixed as they were—a syncretistic blend of Judaism and Canaanite paganism. So for both ethnic and religious reasons, there was a

lot of bad blood between Jews and Samaritans. In fact, some of the ancient rabbis had taught that it was better to eat the forbidden flesh of pigs than to have dealings with a Samaritan.

Can't you just hear the gasp of outrage and shock? What! A Samaritan!! A Samaritan the hero of this story!! Scandalous! Outrageous! Who does this fellow think he is! How dare he insult us like that! And it gets worse. Not only does this despised Samaritan feel compassion for the wounded man, but he interrupts his journey, gives him first aid, and then takes him to the next roadside inn that he comes to, and out of his own pocket, gives the innkeeper money to allow the man to rest up there and get well. He even promises to come back and pay more if the man needs to stay longer than what he's calculated. He doesn't call a press conference to publicize his good deed or pose for a sketch artist to draw his picture for the local newspaper. He just takes care of the man in the ditch and then goes on his way and disappears from the story.

But he doesn't disappear from the shocked and outraged hearts of Jesus' listeners. And for two thousand years, that nameless Samaritan has continued to haunt our dreams. He forces us to put together two impossible and contradictory terms—“Samaritan” (or whoever the modern-day equivalent of Samaritans may be for us) and “neighbor.” We are forced, against our own prejudices and hatreds to confess that there is such a thing as a *good* Samaritan. And if we accept that there can be such a thing as a *good* Samaritan, then our whole world is turned topsy-turvy. All our safe ideas, all our comfortable prejudices, all our certainty about who's in and who's out, who's good and who's not, who's worthy and who's not are blown away. The story forces us to see our worst enemy, our most feared and hated group of people, those against whom we are most prejudiced as someone to whom we are bound by the obligations of neighbor love. What is the world coming to?

What indeed? We thought we could

identify our neighbor very neatly. I thought my neighbor was the person next door who I trust enough to come into my house while I'm away and water my plants without stealing anything. But Jesus doesn't answer the question, "*Who is my neighbor?*" Instead, he turns the whole question around: "*Which of these three do you think was neighbor to the man in the ditch?*" Do you see what he's done? He's given the word "neighbor" the force of a verb instead of a noun. Neighbor is not a label we put on someone bound to us by a web of mutually-recognized relationships and responsibilities; rather our neighbor is anyone who needs our compassion, understanding, and help. "Neighbor" is an action that we must do to anyone we meet who is in need, including the person or the group we fear or despise the most. The question is not "Who is my neighbor," but rather "to whom must I become a neighbor?"

When we begin to look at others in light of that question, when we begin to really see the other person as someone toward whom, for Christ's sake, we must act neighborly, only then will we discover the answer to that lawyer's quest, which is our quest as well, the quest for the road to eternal life— life that is more than mere existence, life that is rich with justice and peace and love—the life that God lives in us and which we live in God.

There's a chorus I learned some years ago that sums it up:

When I needed a neighbor, were you there, were you there?

And the creed, and the color, and the name won't matter. Were you there?