

*Who is Our Neighbor?*

Sermon presented by Rev. Martin Woulfe

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The parables attributed to Jesus are my favorite part of the Christian scriptures. These stories give a particular flavor to the gospel narratives and lend some insight into the mindset of Jesus – or, at least, into the mindset of the person who recorded them.

The beauty of a parable is that on one level, it's just a short story. On the other hand, it's a story that's supposed to puncture our assumptions and make us say "aha!" When people begin to say aha! that's the 1<sup>st</sup> stage of transformation.

Now, among the various parables there is the story of the Good Samaritan. This story has proved so powerful that the very phrase "good Samaritan" has entered our language.

As I mentioned about parables in general, this is a simple, direct story, really. According to the account, a lawyer (of the Hebraic law) asked Jesus the question, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus does not offer a direct response, but offers a hypothetical tale: a traveler is attacked by robbers and left on the road, half-dead. Along come three more travelers: first a priest, who sees him and deliberately walks on the opposite side of the road. Next, a Levite – a descendant of the house of Levi, and therefore a person second only to the priest in terms of prestige. And what does he do? The same as the priest. Finally, along comes a Samaritan. Now, the Samaritans were Jewish according to their heritage, but they had acquired different traditions from the mainstream, and, as a result, were held in wide contempt. But this was the person who stopped, took pity on the injured traveler, bound his wounds and took him to a place where he could be cared for. What's more, after paying the caretaker, the Samaritan told him to do whatever was needed and that all costs would be repaid upon his return. End of story, at which point Jesus asked the lawyer, "So which of these three do you think proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" And the lawyer replied, "The one who showed mercy on him." Jesus then gave the lawyer a directive: "Go, and do likewise."

If the story as recorded actually happened, it must have been very uncomfortable for his listeners. As mentioned, the Samaritan was a complete outcast from good society. To put it in its context, if Jesus were alive today & happened to be addressing a crowd of Episcopalians, he might have told the story of the Good Homosexual bishop. If talking to a crowd of Christian Fundamentalists, he might have told the tale of the Good Unitarian. As it is, one wonders why Jesus didn't have a riot on his hands.

This parable continues to exert enormous influence on religious thinkers in the modern era. I heard a case study, some years ago, that put this parable in a fresh light. It seems that some researchers wanted to measure the compassionate response of seminarians. So they devised the following scenario: bring together a group of seminarians for a lecture on the parable of the Good Samaritan; afterwards, have a senior professor call them out, one by one, and tell them to rush a packet across campus to another professor. Along the route, the researchers had planted a person who was by every appearance badly injured whose job it was to call out to these passing people, begging for help. So what do you suppose happened? In every case, the seminarians

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refused to stop and help that man. According to my sources, one student actually stepped over him – but did not break his stride. Pitiful. The only good thing I can say is, as far as I know, none of the seminarians was Unitarian.

And what does this tell us? After all, in the original version, the two recognized religious leaders turned a blind eye to the suffering of the one and hurried to wherever they were destined. In the more modern case study, the men being groomed to be religious leaders behaved much the same. It doesn't make religious professionals look good, either then or now.

What does shine through is the notion that there is some basic good, at least in some people. Be it a Samaritan or a homosexual or a liberal or even a fundamentalist -- never mind the posturing of others, or the fact that others might hold such a person in contempt – there remains the opportunity for each person to ignore one's other's categorical thinking and behave in the most humane of ways.

So, the story actually answers two questions: who is our neighbor, and what are our obligations to him or her.

Why bring up this story now? Several reasons. The first has to do with the fact that we are entering the major holiday season of the larger culture. The pace will quicken for most of us, from now until the New Year. Merchants will be incessantly vying with one another to catch our eye. Some will approach the holidays as though they were an exhausting series of chores – cards to be addressed & mailed; stores to be systematically surveyed, in search of that perfect gift; decorations to be hung or strung; feasts to be conjured; so forth and so on.

There are no doubt many, many errands that we take upon ourselves this time of year that can seem oppressive. There will be many miles to go before we sleep.

And what else do we typically experience at this time of year more than elsewhere? All the appeals. Perhaps you have begun receiving the mailings already. There are food banks, pantries, breadlines and soup kitchens everywhere, seemingly all of a sudden, all clamoring for attention.

The result? A lot of people begin to experience “compassion fatigue” at this time of year. Some begin to resent the many requests, and feel as though they're being nickled and dimed to death. Case in point: this morning, already, we've distributed “Guest at your table boxes” and announced that loaves of bread will be sold, to raise money for St. John's breadline.

I myself, as the minister of this congregation, receive a flood of letters and phone calls from one charity after another, begging for help. These are seasonal appeals & they come in addition to the many other such appeals, be it save the children, save the rainforests, save the whales, save the – fill in the blank.

So how should we respond?

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I do not doubt that you & I want to be a good neighbor. I do not doubt that if we encountered someone directly who needed help, be it money or housing or food, we would make an honest effort to do *something*.

On the other hand, I do not doubt that most people would make some effort under similar circumstances. My hunch is that we are most likely to help those we know first and foremost. If we have any resources and compassion left, we would try to do the right thing for a stranger.

Which raises the question, how much can one person give? When do you know when you've given enough?

What are the risks we're prepared to take? What sacrifice are we prepared to make? What can we hope to gain?

After watching the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, it occurs to me that many people have an unspoken assumption about charitable giving. I would wager that most of us did make contributions for the sake of the families of the victims in the days and weeks after that nightmare. Some may have given out of a sense of survivors' guilt; many I think gave out a sense of frustration – hoping to contribute something, anything.

And what happened in the months after? Reports began to be circulated of the hefty sums that some families were to receive. Suddenly, some people began to have doubts and to suspect that the victims' families were getting too much compensation.

I think that that experience taught me that we are willing to help others, as long as they are not getting more than we ourselves possess & enjoy.

And so now I would ask you to consider what your assumptions might be. For what are assumptions? They are the product of our life experience, and therefore are not that far removed from what we regard as wisdom. I ask this, as a relative newcomer to this community. Having been raised elsewhere, I have my own set of assumptions, my own notions of what is wise and what is foolish.

The other week, I was watching the movie, the Pianist. One of the things that struck me is how quickly people can become accustomed to horrific scenes – desensitized. People walking past corpses in the street. Reminded me of what it's like in the big city, where the homeless and the hungry are so familiar that they become invisible.

And yet, here in Springfield, a new initiative was announced to address the problem of homelessness. That shakes some of my assumptions.

On the other hand, I became aware that there will be two different interfaith thanksgiving celebrations here on Springfield. Whether intentional or not, both are being held on the same date & time, at different locations. One is actually not so much interfaith but ecumenical – it is being hosted by the traditional Christian churches. The other has invited members of the Greater

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Springfield Interfaith Association and therefore will include Christians, Muslims, Jews, Baha'is and even one Unitarian.

But don't think that I'm patting myself on the back for belonging to the interfaith gathering. One thing that you would notice, if you were attend both gatherings, is that the ecumenical Christian gathering is going to be much more racially diverse.

I've seen this before – different clergy associations meet at different times of the day; the members of the GSIA typically meet at noon, once a month – and therefore unavoidably exclude ministers of color who more often than not work a daytime job. It's one form of unconscious racial separation that needs to be addressed. Some might say, well, ministers of color are more conservative and Christian and would resist mingling with the unorthodox, such as myself. But is that true, or is it merely an assumption based upon years of poor scheduling? If that issue were to be addressed, who knows what other assumptions might be overthrown?

Let me offer another parable, of a more modern vintage. A woman dies and meets God face to face. God offers to show this woman the difference between heaven & hell. First he shows her a room in which is a large pot with the most delicious stew. Milling about the pot is a large crowd of gaunt, frantic people. Each individual is carrying an outrageously long spoon. They can dip the spoon into the pot, but it's so long that when they try to raise the stew to their mouths, it all spills onto the floor and seeps into the cracks of the floor. This is hell, says God.

Then God led the woman to another room, in many ways identical to the first. (Finish telling story)

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As we venture into this holiday season, let us be aware of our assumptions & let us beware of those that act like hobgoblins upon our efforts. May we nurture one another, avoid co-dependent behavior, and prove to be a good neighbor to one & all.