

July 10,2022

“WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?”

OSLER MENNONITE CHURCH

Deuteronomy 30:9-14, Luke 10:25-37

Join me in a prayer of coming together in openness, in vulnerability: *“Holy God, we ask that you find a place within our midst, within the spirit of each person today. Touch our thoughts, our spirits, our hearts, rekindle our God given gift to discover your truth today. Amen.”*

I could hardly believe it when Patty and I first began to communicate about a plan for this service, what it might look like. I say that because email from Patty came on June 17. It included her observation that the suggested lectionary reading was from Luke 10, the parable of the Good Samaritan.

I could hardly believe it because on that same day, June 17, this story happened to me.

I had left Laird early that day, driven to Saskatoon and picked up my brother Dan. We have a friend, Brad, that lives a couple of hours west of Saskatoon, and he occasionally needs help around his place. And so by about 10:30 we were at Brad’s tiny community of about fifteen people, and set about helping him. Most of the things Brad was needing help with were on his roof. Brad doesn’t do roofs.

The jobs weren’t big, and by noon, we were done. Brad offered to take us to a favourite Asian restaurant in Biggar for won ton soup, after which we would head home. We got into our two cars, and as we turned onto the highway that would take us to Biggar, we noted Brad pulling over where a hitch hiker stood. Immediately after, the hitch hiker fell to the ground.

Okay, this was moving away from a normal daily activity.

He was still on the ground when we got there, (talk about a Good Samaritan story) a small spare man with a skeletal face, pants held up with twine, a thumb that was heavily bandaged with a rag and black electrical tape. We helped him to his unsteady feet, and Brad recognized him, called him, *“Barney.”* Barney had injured his thumb, was trying to hitch hike to the hospital in Biggar. When Brad had

stopped, Brad's dog Dusty had lunged at the window and Barney had been startled and fell off his unsteady legs. Barney informed us there was no way he was getting into Brad's car with that "*blankety blank*" dog.

Dan and I invited Barney to ride with us.

There was something about looking into Barney's wizened face that excited me. There was a story, many stories, a life lived hard in that face.

The stories started coming out as soon as the trip began. Barney's life had indeed been lived hard. Though he was younger than I, he struggled with kidneys that no longer worked well, due to drinking. He had no license, no vehicle, no friends to call. He was sure that his thumb injury would need surgery in Saskatoon, and how would he get there, it would cost \$500 for a taxi.

At this point, my brother Dan offered to transport him for a mere \$450.

At the Biggar hospital, Dan went in with Barney to ensure that he got to emergency. Then we went for our won ton soup. An hour later we were back, to see if Barney in fact needed a ride to the city. The staff told us that Barney would indeed need to go to Saskatoon, but they were waiting for the surgeon from there to call back. After waiting awhile, we were told that we might as well leave, that the process could easily take the rest of the day, before the word came back from the Saskatoon doctor.

Half an hour later, as we drove through Perdue, Dan's phone rang. It was a nurse. "*Aaah, how long have you known Barney? He really could use a ride.*" I turned the car as Dan explained that we had known Barney for about two hours.

Barney was excited by this adventure. We had to stop once on the way while he bought us pop, then in Saskatoon he needed some KFC chicken, "*cuz you can't eat that hospital food, you know.*" When we finally got to St. Pauls, Barney was desperately trying to figure out how to enter our phone numbers into his own cell.

It was after that, on my way back to Laird, that I found the message from Patty. "*The Good Samaritan. Who is my Neighbour?*" It was after that that I began to ask of myself, of God, what was I to learn about that experience? What learning can I offer here today? That I and Dan are present day Good Samaritans? That picking

up Barney and seeing that his needs were met put us into that role of the “*perfect*” Good Samaritan?

I’ve always assumed that the good Samaritan in this parable represents the role of God, offering protection, support, and love when all else assume a posture of abandonment. And that’s not a role I want to step into, today or any day.

I thought through the Barney story again, with my spiritual receptors set to wide open. What truth was God in fact offering through this day spent in the company of Barney?

Then I remembered looking into his face, as he lay looking up, frightened, in the ditch, not knowing what these big men around him were about. I remembered helping Barney to his feet, inviting him to ride with us. I remember sensing, in myself, sensing curiosity, excitement, opportunity. I remembered a feeling of awe.

I realized, I remembered, that sense of awe is always, always, connected to the presence of holiness. The presence of the Christ.

Was I inviting the Christ into my car? Was it the Christ who was soon sharing stories, thankfulness, a sense of humour, of teasing. Was it the Christ who was telling me details about a hard-lived life that I wouldn’t have otherwise known?

Could it be that the answer to the question, the question that appears in your bulletin as the title of this message, the question, “*Who is my neighbour?*” that the answer is ultimately and only “*The Christ?*”

You may have gathered by now that I experience life as story. I experience God as story. I have limited passion or patience for theology. But tell me a story of your life, and I will find in your story, a story of God.

As we turned around at Perdue, to go and gather up Barney from the Bigger emergency department, I said to Dan, “*I’m feeling our Pa in the car here with us.*”

Pa, our father, though he was a faithful supporter of Superb Mennonite Church, Pa, on occasion found himself at odds with how things happened in the church community. He was fiercely stubborn, at times contrary. No one could tell him, or even suggest to him, as to what he should do. But I learned more from my Pa about ministering to the least of these, ministering to a “*neighbour,*” then anyone else I have known. The lonely, the unwashed, the strange looking bachelor in the

community, those were automatically my Pa's friends. Not because they were his mission in life, not because of that question asked here in Luke 10 about "*who is my neighbour,*" no, Pa gravitated to them because they were simply different, interesting, had stories and lives that were interesting and important.

I expect similar to the sensation that Dan and I had as we first looked into Barney's face, as he lay there in the ditch.

My mother told me a story at some point after my Pa died, many years ago. She mentioned a man, Jake Bernhardt, who was a friend of my fathers when I was very young. I must have been pre-school because my first language at the time was obviously German, which it was till I began school. So Jake Bernhardt was to me, "Jacob Barnhardt." Which was definitely more fun for me to say.

Mom's story had Jacob at our farm in those early days, I don't know what the reason was. At meal time, my Pa invited him in to sit at our table. I recall mom describing Jacob as having only about two teeth in his mouth, and that food kept falling out! Further more, it was well known that he was a JW! She was horrified that he sat at her table. And yet, she told me, "*Pa didn't even care. Pa didn't notice all these things that were bothering me. He just visited and ate and laughed and swapped stories with his friend Jacob.*"

Could Jacob have been the neighbour? Could Jacob have been the Christ?

When I read through the gospels, I find those gospels loaded with stories of the Christ, reaching out to "*the least of these.*" I also find it comforting, reassuring that the Christ is, in fact, there among those same, "*least of these.*" The passage in Matthew 25, the parable of the sheep and the goats, gives me permission to go there. "*I was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, in prison, and you ministered to me. To me!*"

In your introduction, my Person To Person history was referred to. Holly and I began visiting at Sask Pen in the late eighties. I'm well aware there were people from this congregation that were there in those early days as well. The first inmate Holly and I were matched with was Hoppy, a Martimer who was big and rough and stubborn. He has an undealt with addiction that, again and again, caused him to make choices that brought him back into the federal system. But our visits seemed to be going well.

A few years into our relationship, we had to miss a visit. We informed Hoppy, through the director, Dale Schiele, that our cousin, Norm Wiebe had died in a motorcycle accident, A few here might recognize that name. Anyway, we let Hoppy know that we would be dealing with the impact of that loss for as long as it took.

Within a few days, a card of condolence appeared in the mail. It was from Hoppy, letting us know that he was caring about us, that he was thinking about us, that our pain was somehow his pain, though I suspect he wasn't quite that eloquent with his words. But the card was certainly eloquent enough that it caused me to completely re-evaluate why we drove four hours to visit Hoppy in Prince Albert, that those visits would be far less about bring Christ past the steel walls, and instead be much more about going there to meet Christ who waited for us there. It's a theme that has continued throughout those thirty-five years of visiting, in every relationship, every conversation. *"What does Christ have to offer me today?"* It has certainly energized my commitment for all of those years.

The Luke 10 passage begins with the *"expert in the law"* quizzing Jesus, looking for inconsistency, I suggest. He correctly answers Jesus' first challenge with a recital of what you and I know as the Greatest Commandment, *"Love God, love your neighbour as yourself."* Jesus affirms that answer, *"Right on. Now go do it."*

But the so-called expert needs a bit more detail. *"What does that look like on the ground? How am I expected to live that out?"*

Jesus offers this beautiful and simple little story. It's a story, as I mentioned at the beginning of my message, that has had a direct correlation to my life. In fact, many correlations. I suspect to yours as well. I certainly realize that as a big, strong, imposing white male, that I might have comfort zones where others might not. At the same time, because you might be my opposite in all those things I mentioned about being a big strong male, all the ways that you are at the other end of those spectrums invite you into opportunities that I won't have. Use them to discover the Christ. And when you do, point out to the person who is holding those holy qualities out to you that you are experiencing blessings from being in the presence of that person.

The most broken people you will encounter, in fact every person you encounter, need to hear those words of worthiness, those words of awe.

“You are the Christ to me!”

Amen.