

## **Who is My Neighbour?**

Luke 10:25-37 by Patty Friesen Peace Sunday 2 (Nov. 17/24)

Based on The False White Gospel by Jim Wallis

In our gospel reading today, an expert in the law stood up to ask Jesus a lot of questions. Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? But Jesus turns the question on him, asking; What is written in the Law? The expert replied knowingly - 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 Love your neighbour as yourself. But the expert wanted to justify himself so he asked Jesus; And who exactly is my neighbour? He is not asking who is his neighbor so I can love better or how can I serve better? No the question he is really asking is: what are the limits of my responsibilities? Do I really need to treat everyone as a neighbour? He is looking for loopholes as all of us often do. It's about getting out of responsibility for someone else. So Jesus tells him - there's no getting out of this fact - your neighbour is your very worst enemy.

The text never refers to the Samaritan as good. In Jesus' time there was no such thing as a good Samaritan. There were unclean and dangerous Samaritans but no good ones. They were a mixed race, half Jewish and half Arab and they were not only the enemy of the expert of the law but the expert of the law is an enemy of theirs - someone who has used their privilege and law against Samaritans to uphold their social and economic advantage as a ruling class.

Such a man, an expert of the law, a man with privilege and wealth was making his way to Jerusalem from Jericho and falls into the hands of robbers, probably who were Samaritans, who take everything he has and beat and leave him lying half dead in

a ditch. We all share this fear that suddenly our lives may be violently interrupted, that we may be robbed of our property and potentially our lives. The story is a crime scene. When you come upon a crime scene and discover what has just happened, there is no guarantee that the perpetrators are not still present, lurking somewhere and even waiting for another victim. You begin to consider: Maybe this could happen to me. I am taking a risk by stopping and drawing near to the one who is suffering and making myself vulnerable to attack.

And so two people passed by - a priest and a Levite; neither willing to take a risk for someone like them, an equal or a colleague or someone of their own religion, social class and ethnicity. But the victim's enemy - someone of a different social class, ethnicity and religion, probably like the ones who attacked him in the first place, stopped and really wanting to pass this enemy by, was moved by compassion and gave him first aid and got him to a hotel where he could recover and more than that stayed with him overnight to help him, also giving the hotel owner money to look after him and saying I will repay you for whatever more you spend.

The expert in the law concedes that the neighbour was "the one" who showed mercy. He can't even say the hated word Samaritan but rather "the one." Satisfied that Jesus has made his point, Jesus then tells the expert to go and do likewise.

In Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s powerful sermon *The Jericho Road*, King reflects on the question the priest and the Levite ask themselves: If I stop to help this man, what will happen to *me*? Then King imagines the Samaritan asking a reverse question, If I *don't* stop to help this man, what will happen to *him*? This powerful reversal is at the heart of what Jesus is saying here – reversing putting ourselves always first to think of

others. The question of who will help the man in the ditch? becomes who will help us when we fall into a ditch? It might be our own enemy – therefore if we cannot recognize our enemy as our neighbor, we might be left for dead somewhere. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. But Jesus' words go even beyond even being a Good Samaritan.

King goes on to suggest that the Jericho road should be fixed to make it less dangerous. King always looked at both the personal and the policy side of things. One day the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be beaten and robbed as they make their way. True compassion is more than putting those Jericho gangsters in jail. It is asking why they are robbing others in the first place. We are all linked – victims and offenders on the Jericho Road in the problem of safety and security together.

The deepest theological issues of grace and love are involved here. For this parable addresses what is at stake for the people of God, then and now, namely whether we will see it as a call and challenge to extend the love and grace of God to all people or not. Our task is to take up the challenge that Jesus is clearly offering to all those still morally constricted and controlled by racial and social and religious categories of us versus them. This is what every election this fall focused on these very issues of fear, safety, security, others who seem dangerous. There is so much at stake here with the Good Samaritan parable - for faith, for justice, and for democracy. So says Jim Wallis, founder of the Christian community Sojourners in Washington DC (*The False White Gospel*, pgs. 54-58).

Jim Wallis also says, when I watched Donald Trump come down the escalator at Trump Tower in New York City to announce his White House ambitions, I suspected and feared that he would become our next president. All my colleagues at Sojourners thought I was nuts. Trump was basing his candidacy on fear of the other and ultimately that fear leads to hate. As we saw in the Trump presidency, eventually that hate led to violence, most dramatically on January 6. Trump was always running against the Samaritan, running literally against those who Jesus said were our neighbours and whom we are called to love. Speaking to his fellow evangelical Christians who voted in Trump, Wallis scolds them saying; “excluding and attacking those who are different, rejecting the outcasts and the outsiders, in particular, literally puts you at odds with Jesus. You have sold out your discipleship for political power...How can it be that believers called to radical inclusion, of any group in the United States, are the most hostile to refugees? How can anyone who serves God’s boundless kingdom of love and generosity ever rally to the political banner “America First?” (p. 58-62)

The key teaching from Jesus in the Good Samaritan parable is that our neighbours, as Jesus defines them, most likely live outside of our immediate neighbourhood. When our political leaders and media deny the neighbour ethic and even reverse it to make neighbours into enemies, it becomes harder to live out the ethic of Jesus. The Good Samaritan parable was quite offensive to those who first heard it. It remains disruptive and challenging today. Our neighbour is the one outside of our comfort zone, the one we least expect, the one we didn’t invite to dinner. (p. 62)

When it comes to the neighbour question, Latin American theologian Gustavo Gutierrez says, “Who is my neighbour? The neighbour is *not* the one whom I find in my

daily path where I live and work and go to church, but rather my neighbour is the one in whose path I place myself, the one whom I approach and actively seek out. (p. 63).

Who we know is whomever we live beside, work with and go to church with but to have proximity with neighbours outside our normal paths, we have to place ourselves in our pathways as Gutierrez teaches us. Some of the biblical translations of the Good Samaritan speak of the Samaritan coming to the wounded man. Coming near to him makes him have pity on him. Proximity is what most often creates understanding, empathy and compassion. Some of us know how life changing stepping off the path can be.

Those of us teaching in public schools and working in health care, those of us who have volunteered at Friendship Inn or with the Red Cross and those of us who have worked overseas know what it is like to step off our white middle-class Mennonite path and step into someone else's path. Those of us farming beside difficult neighbours know what it's like to try to step over the fence for a visit. This stepping out of the familiar and into the unfamiliar and even uncomfortable is a discipline and an act of faith.

Jesus never said, "Blessed are the peace-lovers." Why would he have bothered to bless the peace-lovers? We all fall under that umbrella. We all love peace but that's not enough. Jesus also never said, blessed are the peace-keepers. Sometimes peace is kept so that the status quo may not be disturbed. But there is no nobility in maintaining peace in the midst of injustice and oppression. In that case, peacekeeping amounts to nothing more than silent complicity. Rather Jesus told his disciples that God blesses the peace-makers, those who work to overcome conflict. Jesus was not

advocating passivity - he was calling his followers to an active pursuit of peace. Those who face conflict and potential enemies head-on and bring healing. (Wallis, P. 155)

To Jesus' directive Love your neighbour as yourself, we could add a postscript: No exceptions. Love your neighbour as yourself - no exceptions. We could post this on our marquee on 2nd Ave. If we are to be of service to the world, we have to live by our faith with integrity, reaching out like good Samaritans to different races, different civic and religious communities, and yes, to different political affiliations. Faith communities can and should offer a moral compass that transforms culture and politics and goes deeper than politics, deeper than power, deeper than self-interest.( P. 72-73).

Let's pray...Compassionate God – help us do this hard work you've called us to – beginning with the fears and resentments that lie within us – help us confess them and in spite of them, help us find the pity and compassion that reaches out beyond our own interests. It's a tall order, but you wouldn't ask it of us if you didn't give us the strength and courage to do it. Amen.