

Who is My Neighbor?

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This is a far more important question now than when the lawyer asked it of Jesus. In the book of Genesis we have Cain asking, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (4:9) A similar question was asked of Jesus, and he told his listeners one of the best-known and famous stories about the Good Samaritan. The lawyer probably wanted a legal answer but Jesus surprised him as well as his listeners. Maybe we need to surprise our listeners at times with a different approach to our homilies. If we study the Fathers of the Church to the scholastics, this parable was told as a parable about Jesus. The man in the ditch signified Adam who was expelled from the Garden of Eden. The scribe and the priest who passed by represented the law and the prophets respectively. The stranger is Jesus who anoints Adam and takes him to an inn, which represents the Church. Jesus returns in the Second Coming. So the neighbor is Jesus who showed mercy. In this interpretation we need to point out to our listeners how we are called to

imitate the neighbor.

As Father James F. Keenan, SJ points out, "The parable, by being about Christ, is not first and foremost about what we are called to do. Rather, the parable is first and foremost about what Christ has done for us. This is key: we are the wounded man, and the Good Samaritan is the one who first has been merciful to us. Because we received his mercy, we are able to become merciful. In one and the same parable we have the story of our salvation, and, then, the call to love our neighbor."

Jesus challenges the lawyer in the Good Samaritan story not to name the neighbor but to become one. To better grasp who is our neighbor we need to understand space, especially as we live in a mobile society and much urban anonymity. As space increases so does our concept of neighbor. We are attempting to conquer outer space, which is limitless, but often fail to be more aware of the space around us. Traditionally we considered neighbors as those who lived in our area or block. Now many

people don't even know who lives in the same block. I have visited homebound people and sometimes had to ask directions or inquire about someone and where they lived. In some instances people didn't know that this person lived in their block when he or she did. We often know more about people living in Afghanistan, the Middle East or elsewhere than we do about neighbors living in our locale.

We read or hear about belonging to a global village, but do we really know our global neighbors? Our refusal to sign the global warming treaty, the land mine treaties, using the island of Vieques as target practice even though the islanders consider us invaders, are indications we don't respect our neighbors.

Who then is our neighbor? Our neighbor is the innocent person on death row, the migrant farm worker trying to make a living on substandard wages, the millions of homeless, the senior citizens who have to make a choice between food and prescription drugs. Our neighbors are people we bypass today, especially what Judith Butler names the "sexual abject," people who repel us by their sexual orientation and life styles. A good example is Matthew Shepherd who was severely beaten and left to die on a fence post in Laramie, Wyoming. Other examples are people subjected to racism, sexism, sexual abuse, racial profiling, sexual predators, trafficking (the UN Convention

considers them the most serious violation of human rights) or people with AIDS or HIV virus. In the United States twelve million children have parents who can't afford the food needed to feed them. It is said that an eighteen-minute ride with nine stops in Manhattan will take a person from one of the richest neighborhoods to the poorest.

Did you ever notice how in the newly constructed homes front porches are non-existent? But in one area people told the architects to construct their kitchens in the front, not in the rear of the house. The reason: because then they could more readily face the street and keep a watchful eye on their neighbors. At work we rush around having little time to develop relationships. We do well interacting with the Internet, but that is not eyeball-to-eyeball contact. How often we read, hear or even experience rudeness or road rage in our society.

At Mass we ask our audience to turn to our neighbor and offer some sign of greeting. But isn't there more needed? Some parishes offer opportunities for fellowship like coffee and donuts, but what percentage attend those functions? How many parishes have the word "neighbor" in their mission statement? Some parishioners, however, take the message of being a neighbor seriously and volunteer their talents to rebuild homes in the poorer city areas. Jimmy Carter, former president, has set a

powerful example in working for Habitat for Humanity. While doing this in the Philippines, the owner of a home noticed how Jimmy's sweat was dropping into the mortar of the home's foundation. Deeply impressed she said to him, "Now you are a part of us forever."

Mr. Rogers

The creator and host of the Mister Rogers Neighborhood tells the story of the time he was on a vacation in New England. He attended a small church to hear a visiting preacher. He confessed that it was the worst sermon he ever heard. He thought to himself, "He has violated every principle of preaching, and this is a waste of time." Then he noticed a lady sitting next to him in tears. She said to him, "He said exactly what I needed to hear." Rogers then realized how judgmental he had been and how this message spoke to her heart.

What enabled Fred Rogers' career to last longer than many television stars that also directed their programs towards children? Other programs are certainly more sophisticated than his. The answer is that when Rogers speaks to children he does not address them as "boys and girls," or someone out there in television land. He addresses them as you. Even when singing, "Won't you be my neighbor?" Rogers addresses the individual child and not just a group.

This is certainly solid advice for preachers when we address our listeners. How important it is to use you or we (don't say we parents when you aren't one). Many homilies end up as essays rather than homilies with a personal and intimate touch. The personal approach insures engagement by the listeners as Mr. Rogers does so well in his program.

Strangers

In the Hebrew Scriptures three groups needed to be shepherded: widows, orphans, and foreigners or strangers. We read in Leviticus that the Jews were told, "When an alien resides in your land, do not molest him. You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you were once aliens in the land of Egypt." (19:33-34) Samaritans in the New Testament were certainly considered strangers as is brought out in the Good Samaritan story (Lk. 10:9-37) and the healing of the ten lepers, when only one, a Samaritan, came back to thank Jesus (Lk. 17:11-19) Also the Samaritan woman who drew water at Jacob's well. After her interchange with Jesus she invited others to see him. (Jn. 4:41) Notice in the Good Samaritan story, the lawyer is unable to say the Samaritan but rather, "the one who treated him with mercy." (Lk. 10:37)

The Jews despised Samaritans holding them in contempt and would not even speak to them on the streets. (Acts 10:28) Peter insisted "that God shows no partiality." (Acts. 10:34)

Immigrants are certainly strangers in our country. We as a nation are deeply indebted to them as Abraham Lincoln brought out in his proclamation of Thanksgiving Day. Immigrants, up until recent times, did not pose a threat to our nation. But a drastic change has taken place especially with immigrants from Asia and Latin America. As preachers we need to address this problem or attempt to answer the questions: Are immigrants doing more harm than good? Are they taking away jobs from the native born? How are they influencing our culture, politics and way of life? Certainly these are ethical, legal and biblical justice issues.

We encounter strangers in malls, bus and train stations, airports, shopping centers and elsewhere. Ordinarily we don't engage in conversation. Is there something expected of us besides ordinary courtesy? Jesus told another parable that "When you hold a lunch or a dinner do not invite your friends or your brothers, or your relatives or your wealthy neighbors, in case they invite you back and you have repayment. Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the

righteous." (Lk. 14:12-14) St. Paul encouraged the Romans to "contribute to the needs of the holy ones, exercise hospitality." (12:13)

Tragedies build relationships

9/11 was indeed a tremendous tragedy, which will not be forgotten, but it also transformed complete strangers into neighbors. Many heroic stories have been told of individuals willing to sacrifice their own lives to save others. People were willing to claw through endless wreckage hoping to find someone alive. Total strangers came to New York to help wherever they could. Another recent story was how nine coal miners were saved in Somerset, Pennsylvania. One of the heroes (maybe unsung) was Joseph Shaffoni. He decided to rescue the miners by drilling a six-inch shaft down to the miners and force compressed air through it. That operation gave the miners air to breathe and kept the water at bay. Shaffoni also decided where to sink the shaft. The miners helped each other to the point that if they were going to die or live they would do it together. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. believed that we have to learn to live together otherwise we will die together. He saw how the world was becoming a neighborhood, and the challenge remains to make it a brotherhood (sisterhood). We break down walls of

mistrust and antagonism as soon as people become our neighbors. We are given new lenses to look at these people and appreciate that they really are in God's eyes, unconditionally loved.

For Christians there are no boundaries, borders, or limits. Learning this can be freeing and at the same time risky and dangerous. The Levite and priest knew their boundaries and stayed in their safety zones. Not knowing if the man was dead they did not want to touch a corpse because the Torah stated they would be unclean. Both of them were so occupied in obeying the law that they forgot how to be compassionate. Love must become more important than religious beliefs. Our modern culture stresses how important our own goals are, and that we don't meddle in other peoples' affairs. Jesus makes it clear "Whatever you did for one of these least brothers (sisters) of mine, you did for me." (Mt. 25:40) That removes all boundaries. Mother Teresa of Calcutta admitted that she saw God in the lepers she washed. She felt as if she was caring for Jesus. No boundaries, borders or limits existed in her life as well as in so many that followed in her footsteps.

Love of God and neighbor

Karl Rahner believes the love of God and neighbor are intimately con-

nected. We need to point out to our listeners how the majority of us live a peaceful co-existence or manage a surface relationship that often distances us from our neighbors. God intended us to find our fulfillment and freedom in reaching out to our neighbors. We find God when we are in communion with one another, and the opposite might also be true. Rahner also shifts the love of neighbor to a deeper meaning of being in communion with all our brothers and sisters. This shift is certainly inspired by the Holy Spirit and reflects more the love of God and neighbor resulting in acts of service, kindness, compassion and forbearance. Then love of neighbor ceases to be a command and enables us to be more God-like.

The highest kind of love that we need to preach which is emphasized in the Gospels consists in love that is not returned, love that has no or little reward, and love that is often accompanied by disappointment and ingratitude. This love tests how heroic we are because it is an "unselfish love," where we do not judge our brothers and sisters for their usefulness to us. Rahner challenges us to think like Jesus, not in self-enclosed little boxes where we find ourselves at times. Or ask ourselves, what would Jesus do? We can so easily get caught up in our own little world. He also stresses the need to pray for others as another way to enter into deeper communion with all our brothers and sisters.

Rahner was highly esteemed not only as a scholar but also because he practiced what he taught and preached. He cared for the poor and hungry and deeply felt the need for prayer in his own life. He believes that we need to change the expression "save your soul," to "save your neighbor."

We need to preach that we cannot say we love God whom we do not see and hate our brother and sister whom we

see. (1 Jn. 4:20)

The God whom we do not see becomes visible in the neighbor we see. Jesus

shared meals with sinners and tax collectors and was accused of doing so by the Scribes and Pharisees. (Mk. 2:16) Communion with them was a much higher value for him than the law. St. Paul stated concerning the body, "If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it." (1 Cor. 12:26) This can easily be applied to all the suffering in the world at the present time as well as our ecology and other areas of injustice.

An African saying expresses the idea of relationship well, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." Martin Buber's *I and Thou* certainly emphasizes the need for us to relate in meaningful ways. Our bodies are made up of billions of cells, and, according to biologists, they are communicating with each other.

Love of self and neighbor

A scholar of the law asked Jesus what was the greatest commandment. He responded, "You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Mt. 22:36-39)

Buddhists insist that love of self and love of neighbor are equal. In their philosophy all unhappiness stems

from desiring happiness for us only.

We can blame most everything on self-occupation. The focus has to be on others. They go so far as to suggest the breathing in others' suffering, and breathing out love, compassion and care. The prophet Muhammad singled out who are our neighbors: people forty houses in front of us, in back of us, and on the side of us. He was once asked about a woman who fasted, prayed and gave to charitable causes, but was very uncharitable in speech to her neighbor. He responded that she is in hell fire. A story is told of a man whose house contained vermin. Calling the pest control company he found out that they could get rid of the vermin. But when the man found out the vermin would leave his house

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and go somewhere else in the neighborhood, he said no. Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached very forcefully on the topic of love of neighbor insisting that this was the hallmark of being a disciple of Jesus. He was convinced that the German churches had avoided concrete action to overcome the evils of the Nazis. In the seventeenth chapter of John's Gospel Jesus prayed for himself, his disciples and for all believers "so that they may all be one." (v.21) This prayer has not been answered yet, and will only come to fruition when we love our neighbor as ourselves. Our coins carry the motto "E Pluribus Unum." That remains our challenge to preach this effectively.

Maybe a word, phrase, or a sentence will stand out in bold relief. We might be surprised what happens. What made the Samaritan stop and help the man, pity, compassion, or was he himself an outcast? Why would Jesus choose a Samaritan as hero of the story? Was it the bitter rivalry between the Jews and Samaritans? Do we notice how Jesus really does not answer the lawyer's question by defining who a neighbor is? Jesus clarified that the lawyer is a neighbor when he acts like the Good Samaritan. This implies that there is risk involved and we are exposed to vulnerability.

Another way might be to end your homily with a story. It is related in the life of Mother Teresa of Calcutta that one day a man came to her saying there was a family of eight children who had not eaten for days. She immediately took some food and went to the family where she saw the disfigured faces of the children but no sadness, just deep pain. She gave the food to the mother who distributed some of the food to the children and then left. When asked where she had gone, she responded, "To my neighbors - they are hungry too." One might conclude a homily the way Jesus did, "Go, and do likewise." (Lk. 10:37)

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