

Choosing Our Neighbor?  
Leviticus 19: 1-4, 11-18; Luke 10: 25-37  
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Margot Trusty Pickett

Every time I read this parable I can't help but think of a conversation I had with my college roommate, Ann. One night as I was drifting off to sleep, a plaintive question came from the other side of the room, "Margot, what does it mean to love your neighbor?" At that moment I knew I was in trouble. I knew that sleep would be delayed for hours and that none of the things that I had learned in Sunday school, Bible stud, or my religion classes was going to be enough to answer Ann's anguished question. I knew Ann didn't want to hear about being a nice person, going the extra mile, or giving a hand up not a hand out. You see, she'd just come back from watching the film, "The Sorrow and the Pity." You may not remember this film from the early 70s, but it is a devastating four and a half hour documentary about the behavior of the French people during the Nazi occupation. Frankly, it's a movie that makes you ashamed to be a part of the human race. There are a few heroes, but they are really anti-heroes, people who are concerned only with their own survival, people for whom betrayal and selling-out their neighbors became a way of life as they vied for special favors from their occupiers, people who finally joined the French Resistance because they were fed up with the fact that only German soldiers and their families were served steaks at the local restaurants. And as outrageous and despicable as all of this is, you can't watch the film without wondering if you would have behaved any better under such terrible and terrifying circumstances.

So Ann, a sensitive young woman and conscientious Christian, had come back to our dorm room deeply disturbed. Actually, she was upset not only by this movie but by an accumulation of horrors and injustices that another classmate had brought to her attention over a period of a few weeks. Ann wanted desperately to address each and every one of these problems, and suddenly she felt completely overwhelmed and inevitably paralyzed by the enormity of evil and inhumanity in our world and her responsibility to try to do something about it. Ann believed deeply that the heart of the Gospel is the admonition to love your neighbor as yourself, but at that moment she saw an almost infinite number of neighbors who needed her love and attention. After hours and hours of conversation, we finally concluded that one simply had to choose one area of concern, one particular problem to address and do *that* rather than try to tackle all the world's problems at once.

As I've looked back at that night I still think that wasn't a bad answer for that situation. It was the only way I was going to get *any* sleep that night, and more seriously, it was the only way for Ann to act on her strong Christian convictions. As they say, every journey begins with a single step, and often one has to focus solely on the first step or two to not be totally overwhelmed by the distance and difficulty of the trip ahead. But while that might have been an okay response that night, I'm afraid that it's just the kind of answer that Jesus would have scorned. It's the kind of answer the lawyer in this story was hoping that Jesus would give him.

We don't know a lot about this man except that he appears to be a good and righteous person, a serious student of the Jewish law who was able pretty impressively to summarize all 613 commandments of the Torah in one compound sentence, by quoting Deut. 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18: Love God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus tells him that he is spot on, and now he just needs to go do that and he will have eternal life. At that point the lawyer does some quick thinking and asks one more question, "Who

exactly is my neighbor?" The scripture says he asks this "in order to justify himself," but maybe like Ann, he was simply overwhelmed with the enormity of these commandments. "What does it mean to love your neighbor? Who all is included in that term neighbor? Can we narrow this down a bit, because if you say 'everyone,' I don't have any idea how even to begin?" To be clear, this lawyer was not the first person to ask this question. In fact rabbis had forever been debating precisely this topic: what does the Law (e.g., Lev. 19:18) mean by "neighbor." And not unlike Ann and me, the rabbis had concluded that it was a term of limited liability that included only fellow Jews, and excluded almost everyone else.

So, now this lawyer, this student of the Jewish law, wants Jesus to weigh in on this longstanding debate and provide his own definition of neighbor. But Jesus isn't about to be dragged into an argument that divvies up humanity into groups of people: those who deserve to be loved and cared for, and those who don't. So instead he tells a parable.

Once there was a man traveling along the road between Jerusalem and Jericho who got mugged—beaten and robbed and left for dead by the side of the road. Soon after two other people came down the same road, first a priest and then a Levite—the most religious, righteous, respected folks of their day—and they both crossed to the other side of the street so they didn't have to look at this poor man lying in a ditch. Then a Samaritan, a non-believing, good-for-nothing, dirty foreigner (because that's how Jews felt about Samaritans and vice versa), came along and when he saw the guy lying there, he looked him full in the face and had compassion. He took care of this stranger at great expense of his own time and money, even promising to come back and check in on him. End of the parable.

And now we expect Jesus to deliver the punch line or moral or lesson. We anticipate that he'll say something like, "So, you see, people who are in trouble—those are your neighbors." Or as the saying goes, "a friend in need is a friend indeed." But Jesus doesn't say anything like that. Instead, Jesus asks the lawyer another question, "Which of these 3 do you think *proved to be a neighbor* to the man lying in the ditch?" And again the lawyer gets it right, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus says, "Go and do likewise."

And now the light bulb goes on and we realize how Jesus has turned the lawyer's question on its head. He doesn't offer a definition of neighbors by who they are, where they live, whether they look like us or believe the same things we believe, attend our synagogue or our church or our mosque. In fact, it's not about the other person at all. It's about *us* and how we relate to other people. It's about whether or not we'll stop what we're doing and put aside our stereotypes take the time to look someone in the eye and show them compassion. It's about if we can see across the constructs of race and class, gender and religion to understand that this is another beloved child of God lying in the ditch, beaten and bleeding. It's about whether we're willing not only to offer charity but also build relationships, to become neighbors. Jesus makes a point of saying that the Samaritan not only touched this man who would have considered him untouchable, he got involved in the intimacy of cleaning his wounds and relieve his pain. He stayed at the inn to take care of him; he didn't just drop him off. The next day when he had to leave, he pulled 2 days wages out of his wallet to pay for his stay, and said he'd be back. He established an ongoing relationship with this man whom society and religion had taught him to fear, to distrust, to hate.

This week we have lived through and witnessed another series of senseless, outrageous killings of black men by police officers and of police officers by a black man. We cannot help but be shocked, deeply saddened, and overwhelmed by the amount of fear, suspicion, and hatred that is running rampant in our country. Already and in the days and weeks ahead many, many

questions will be raised, and I fear not many answers will be offered that will bring healing or understanding or reconciliation or a way forward. But maybe one question we can ask of ourselves is that same anguished question Ann asked me years ago, “What does it mean to love your neighbor?” I hope that we—as individuals, as a congregation, and as the Body of Christ—can seek for honest, illuminating answers, not simple definitions that limit or exclude in any way. I hope that we might discover the answers by taking the time to look at every person we encounter on our journeys as a beloved child of God and have compassion. I pray that we can find the faith and courage to overcome our own fears, prejudices, and suspicions so that we can build relationships in which we care for, listen to, learn from, and stand with even those who are different from us. If we do, I believe that we will not only understand what it means to have eternal life, but we, too, like that compassionate Samaritan, might prove ourselves to be true neighbors.