

Amos 7:7-17  
Psalm 82

Colossians 1:1-14  
Luke 10:25-37

There is one question I want to ask the Christians of our nation: What is it about “love your neighbor” that we don’t get. What is there about the parable of the Good Samaritan we do not understand? I’m asking that for it seems like there is an increasing hostility toward those who are not white, able-bodied, straight people. There is hate speech about Muslims. One presidential candidate wants to restrict Muslims from entering our nation and to have our police patrol Muslim neighborhoods. He has made racist comments and denigrated women and people with disabilities. What concerns me are those who agree with him. One young Asian woman who was with the media waiting outside a building with supporters as they were waiting to go inside for a rally. One of those in the crowd told this woman to go back to Iraq. Recently I heard about a young protestant woman pastor in a small community. There was a new church plant in that town, and the pastor of the new church plant informed her that as a woman pastor she was sinning. He informed her that he would not participate in the local ministerial alliance if she participated and other male clergy in the community are saying the same thing. The killer responsible for the mass killings of nine people during a prayer service at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church confessed that he was hoping to ignite a race war. The Pulse nightclub, a gay bar, was the scene of the deadliest mass shooting by a single gunman in US history, killing 49 people. What do we not understand about loving our neighbor?

Let’s review what Jesus had to say about loving our neighbor. It all started out with a young lawyer asking Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responds with a question, “Well, what is written in the law?” The lawyer responds “You

shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.” This comes from a portion of Leviticus that Jewish scholars believe reflects the highest ethical standards of the Hebrew Bible. It is the heart of the Jewish faith. And, it is the highest ethical standard for us Christians. To love God and to love neighbor is the heart of our faith.

“Wanting to justify himself, [the lawyer] asks Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” Perhaps the lawyer hoped for a narrow definition of who was his neighbor, so that it would be easier to justify his actions. It is as though the lawyer was asking, “OK Jesus, where is my limit?”

Jesus responds with the parable. A man is on his way from Jerusalem down to Jericho. While on the road he is attacked and left near-dead in the ditch. A priest walks by, but crosses over to the other side to keep his distance from the victim. A Levite does the same thing. The priest and the Levite were the religious leaders of the day. They were experts in and knowledgeable about Jewish law. The actions of these religious leaders expressed their narrow definition of who was their neighbor.

A Samaritan comes upon the scene, and, upon seeing the victim, rushes to his aid, bandages his wounds, takes him into town and leaves him with an innkeeper. He tells the innkeeper that when he returns, he will pay for any of the expenses the innkeeper might incur in helping the victim. And then Jesus asks the lawyer, “Who do you think was the neighbor?” The lawyer says, “The one who showed him mercy.”

Now, as Paul Harvey used to say, “The rest of the story.” Note here the lawyer could not bring himself to say the word “Samaritan.” The fact that the hero was a Samaritan is important for the Samaritans were despised foreigners. Good observant

Jews would not even speak to a Samaritan. Surely, Samaritans were not included in their neighborhood. And so, it could very well have been that when the audience heard that it was the Samaritan who is the hero of this story, that audience was scandalized, outraged. Then there is the victim. This traveler, this wounded man, was probably a merchant or a trader. In that day such traders were notoriously dishonest, and their itinerant lifestyle and constant interaction with all sorts of people made it impossible for them to observe even the most basic laws of Judaism. Being naked and half-dead, to have touched him would have meant contaminating themselves and observant Jews were careful about cleanliness. The priest and the Levite kept their distance so as to not become ritually unclean. That would have placed a limit on any good Jew helping out the victim. Innkeepers were also despised people for they would accommodate traders. Decent people would avoid inns at all costs! The victim, the Samaritan, and the innkeeper all represented people who were probably considered beyond the limits of being the neighbor the Jewish lawyer was to love.

But it is a big neighborhood. Jesus breaks in on the old world order. Jesus spelled the end of the world order by enlarging the neighborhood. Jesus enlarged the boundary of who is this neighbor that I must love? In Jesus' world there is no tolerance for hostility toward others, hatred spewed toward others.

In today's world, in our society, it seems like we are returning to the old world order. They oppose Christ's teaching by being hostile and spewing hatred toward those who are different from us. They want to go back to the narrow definition of who their neighbor is. Racism, sexism, Islamaphobia, homophobia narrow our definition of who is our neighbor.

Dianna Butler Bass identifies five events in the first decade of this century that revealed the ugly side of organized religion. One event is the Islamophobia and all the hate speech about Muslims after the events of September 11, 2001. And, as she says, it did not help that some religious leaders, like Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and Franklin Graham blamed the violence on our nation being too tolerant of homosexuals and feminists. Another event is that of homophobia, all the hate speech against gays and lesbians. Fred Phelps, of Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, his mantra of "God hates fags." The pronouncements of these religious leaders portray Christians as dangerous, crazy, hateful, and irrelevant. Such hostility and hatred by these religious leaders is not doing the church any favors and portrays a God of hatred and hostility. Jesus came to show a God of grace and love, a God who includes everyone in his neighborhood.

Hatred and hostility by Christians discredits the church of Jesus Christ and it discredits the Christ who came to reveal God's love for all of God's people. As the Presbyterian pastor Fred Rogers

I've always wanted to have a neighbor just like you.  
I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you.

So, let's make the most of this beautiful day.  
Since we're together we might as well say:  
Would you be mine?  
Could you be mine?  
Won't you be my neighbor?  
Won't you please,  
Won't you please?  
Please won't you be my neighbor?

*In the name of Christ, our all in all.*