

WHO IS NOT MY NEIGHBOR?

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A certain lawyer was sent out by the religious establishment of Jerusalem to try to build a case of blasphemy against Jesus. This lawyer, especially trained in legal tactics and armed with superior knowledge of the law proceeds to set a clever trap for Jesus never expecting to have the powerful encounter that we know is to come. He says to him: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus answers: "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"

The lawyer replies, "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."

Jesus then says "You have answered rightly, do this and you will live."

Two good questions and two good answers. A case of two good men agreeing. What more could one ask? Except that we know something is wrong. Questions that are asked merely to gain advantage over another does not make for a learning environment. Up to this point, Jesus and the lawyer are sparring, with neither giving an inch. The lawyer knows the Law and so does Jesus. What more is there to say?

But, then the lawyer tips his hand.

"And who is my neighbor?"

It is a question that reveals a great deal. First, it is spoken arrogantly, cynically. Secondly, it shows that the lawyer thinks he can pick and choose - some people are neighbors and some are not. "Who are the ones I am to love?"

I think the question the lawyer is really asking Jesus is "Who is NOT my neighbor? Who is it that I am allowed to ignore or to neglect? What is the minimal thing that I need to do to keep God's law of love - and what can I safely get away with not doing?"

At first that seems like a pretty negative approach to interpreting the law of God doesn't it? Who must I love - and who can I get away with not loving. But if you think about it, this question makes a certain kind of sense when you look at the world and consider all the evil we see there.

There are people so evil that even God surely cannot love them – serial killers, mass murders, people who prey on and victimize the innocent, people who have broken God's law in the most horrible ways over and over again. Surely we don't have to think of people like that as our neighbors, do we? Surely we do not need to love them. Surely those who live outside the law of God live outside of the law that says we should love them.

Such, I think, was the kind of reasoning that lay behind the lawyer's question, "And who is my neighbor?"

Think about it. How often do we focus our attention, our time, our love, upon particular kinds of people because of where they live and what they do and how they are related to us, and deliberately ignore, neglect, or slight others because of where they live and what they do?

Criminals, drug pushers, welfare cheats, pirates, terrorists, the list of the unworthy seems endless, the list of those who are not worthy to be called our neighbors. We can quickly put together a list of those who for one reason or another do not deserve our love, or are at least not as worthy of as much love as we might give to those we regard as more pure, more deserving, more esteemed by God.

The lawyer could feel justified in asking Jesus "And who is NOT my neighbor?"

Instead of continuing an intellectual debate with the lawyer, Jesus plunks him down on the road to Jericho – puts him precisely where he can see the issue the way that Jesus sees.

John Shea in his stimulating little book "An Experience of Spirit", brilliantly retells Jesus' parable and catches exactly what Jesus seems to have in mind in his response to the lawyer's question.

Shea, telling the story in the words of the lawyer writes:

As soon as I asked the question, 'and who is my neighbor?', "Jesus came across to where I stood. He grabbed both my shoulders, steadying me on my feet, squaring me off like he was readying me for a blow. He locked my eyes into his. "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho," he began. He did not let go of me until he saw in my eyes that I knew I was that man. Then he moved away from me to tell everyone what happened to me on that journey."

First the robbery, then the stripping and beating, then being left for dead by two of his own countrymen, first the priest and then the Levite. Now Jesus has the lawyer where he wants him. He has placed him in the victim's seat where he wants us all - in order to get the message.

The lawyer continues, "After the Levite also left me, I now had nothing, so nothing came to me. Even through my blood-encrusted eyes I could see the next one was a Samaritan. But in his eyes were my tears.

"The damnable thing about it was that it took so long. If only he would have cursed, thrown me on his animal, dropped me in a heap at an inn and went on his way with a slur, "More than you would have done for me." But he cleaned me like a mother bathes a child, rubbed oil in my wounds, tore his own robe for bandages. He put me on his donkey and walked beside it, steadying me. At the inn he laid me on a cot and placed blankets over me. I could hear him paying the innkeeper and saying he would be back to take care of me if it was needed. All that time, that endless time, he never spoke a word to me. Except for the tears.

"The next thing I knew Jesus had me by the shoulders again. He, too, had my tears in his eyes. "Who proved neighbor to the one in need?" It was the only question I have ever heard that was not a test.

"And for once I just spoke, not worrying right from wrong, not breathless for approval. I uttered sounds that were not recitation. My sounds, halting, like a child speaking for the first time, "The one who showed mercy.'"

"You," he said quietly, still holding me by the shoulders, tears still in his eyes, "Go and do the same." And I suddenly found tears in my eyes, but I did not know for whom I cried."

This is the moment of new sight for the lawyer. He suddenly sees the world the way Jesus does from the perspective of the man in the ditch; and when that happens there is no more need for questions or answers or traps. The theological debate is suddenly trivial in comparison to the tears of caring offered to the man in the ditch. Jesus' and story has created for the lawyer an experience of the meaning of "neighbor-ness" and the previous debate now seems insignificant in comparison. For now the lawyer sees that ... "there were no Samaritans. Or Jews. Or Gentiles. Or priests. Or Lawyers. Only those who cry and those who pass by." - John Shea, An Experience of Spirit

When we see the world from the eyes of Jesus, as we do from the perspective of the man in the ditch, we can see that there are no distinctions between people that make any difference whatsoever. From the bottom of the ditch there are only two kinds of people – those who cry (and care) and those who pass by (and don't).

Jesus tells the story to put us all into the perspective of the victim, just as he did to the lawyer. From that perspective, every last one of us is in desperate need of both giving and receiving mercy, of binding up each other's wounds, of taking care of one another and going to the ends of the earth and back for one another if the situation calls for it. From Jesus perspective, we are all in the ditch and we all need to be neighbors to each other.

We should spend no further time on this gospel lesson intellectualizing like the lawyer. We have done enough thinking and now it is time for doing. As we look to the week ahead of us, let's not wonder 'who is our neighbor?' on our road to Jericho. Let us just "go and do likewise." Let us search out opportunities in our dealings with people this week to willingly engage in positive acts of caring and extravagant acts of self-sacrifice, irrespective of our relationship to those in need. For you and me, being a neighbor to others means being willing to cry and not just to pass by.