

**Who is my neighbor?**  
**Luke 10:25-37, Pentecost 7, Year C**  
**15 July 2007**  
**By The Reverend Barkley Thompson**

I'll bet if I'd told you ahead of time what today's Gospel reading was going to be I wouldn't even have needed to read it from the Gospel book. So many know the Good Samaritan so well, I simply could have begun preaching and you'd have recalled from memory the basic outline of the story.

This parable is so often retold that it has become familiar and domesticated—tame, I'd say—like a Norman Rockwell painting or a pithy saying from Ben Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*. We allow the Good Samaritan to be the stuff of "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood," best told with soft cardigan sweaters and comfortable shoes. We render it a simple and sweet story with an easy moral ending. Isn't that true? Isn't that how you think of the Good Samaritan?

But when we look at this story a little more closely, especially in its context, our comfortable recollections of it quickly begin to unravel. Consider the very question to which this story is the answer: "A lawyer stood up to test Jesus and asked, 'Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'"

Immediately we see that this parable is not a simple morality tale for civil living. The question that begins this conversation is a deep one with the most serious of implications. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" asks the lawyer. Another way of asking it might be, *What does a life look like that is in relationship with God, the giver of life?*

Jesus asks the lawyer what Scripture says, and the knowledgeable and well-educated lawyer responds, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind; and you must love your neighbor as yourself."

Then the lawyer hesitates. He clearly believes that he has all the "God stuff" covered, but he wonders about his neighbor. I can imagine him thinking back over his week, considering the people with whom he's interacted personally and—perhaps even more importantly—the decisions he's made that have affected people around him. Heat creeps into his face, and he becomes apprehensive. He wants to justify himself to himself and to God, to make sure he's done *just enough* to inherit eternal life, so he asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

It's then that Jesus gives us the parable. We dare not miss the connection. "Who is my neighbor?" is bound up with the prior question, "How can I live in relationship with the God who gives life?"

A Jewish man is robbed and beaten on the highway and thrown into a ditch to die. Within earshot of his moaning, a priest and a Levite (who was a temple employee) pass by on the other side of the road, not wanting to alter their own important lives in order to get involved. Then a Samaritan passes by, and his response is very different.

We cannot emphasize enough the importance that the one who gives aid to the Jewish man in the ditch is a *Samaritan*. Samaria and Judea, where the Jewish man is from, were the two adjacent provinces that had together made up ancient Israel. They'd divided centuries earlier amidst war and mutual suspicion. Their religions were similar, but they worshiped God differently enough that each considered the other's religion to be a mockery of true faith. Over the years Samaria had experienced an influx of foreign people who had intermarried with native inhabitants, and Jews also considered Samaritans impure half-breeds. It's not out-of-bounds to say that Jews considered Samaritans heretics...dirty...unintelligent...shiftless...and more or less worthless. Samaritans were the objects of suspicion and fear. A Jew might not be overtly and vocally prejudiced but would nevertheless have these assumptions about Samaritans lurking beneath the surface. Should a young Jewish man decide to move to Samaria or perhaps marry a Samaritan woman, for instance, the deep-seeded and visceral reaction of his community would well up.

And so it is shocking to Jesus' audience when he says the "good guys," priest and Levite, pass the injured man by and the Samaritan, a "bad guy," stops and scoops the man out of the ditch with his own tender hands. The Samaritan—dirty and fearsome as he is to the crowd—takes the bloodied and beaten man to a hostel, where he pays for the man's care out of his own pocket, and he promises that he will come back in a few days and cover any additional expenses that are incurred. He alters his schedule and his finances to assist the man in need.

This is no tame story! The lawyer and the crowd listening to Jesus would have been horrified by it. Jesus tells them that they must put away their fear and their loathing and risk loving. What's more, neighborly loving is not the same as passive tolerance (which is the virtue our society extols). Neighborly loving involves active and sometimes life-changing and

sacrificial care. It means making decisions based not on our own schedules and wants but on the urgent needs of those in life's ditches.

And lest some of the nuance be lost on us, keep in mind that the Jew in the story is *the man in the ditch*. In other words, in addition to *aiding* those we would prefer to keep at arm's length, part of being neighborly is being open and vulnerable to *receiving* love and care from those same people. This is often the harder task.

*Who is my neighbor?* Another way of asking this question is, *Who in my life is the Samaritan?* Who would I otherwise choose to fear, to loathe, to disregard, not necessarily on a conscious level, but certainly on a subconscious one? Who would I prefer not to invite into my home...or into my family? Who would I leave in the ditch for fear of what my involvement would mean?

Would it be the Muslim who speaks of Allah rather than God and who wears a long beard or head scarf? Would it be the gay man or lesbian woman? Would be the Hispanic workers speaking in broken English who built the very church in which we now sit?

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Three Sundays ago a doctoral classmate and I drove into the far South Side of Chicago to attend Trinity United Church of Christ, the famous and enormous African-American congregation where the Reverend Jeremiah Wright is the pastor. Trinity UCC and Jeremiah Wright have been in the news a lot lately, because Trinity is the home church of one of our U.S. presidential candidates. The press on Trinity has been mostly negative. It has been called a "black power" church and has been accused of being radical and exclusionary. I wanted to see it for myself.

To get to Trinity, we drove near or through some of the roughest urban neighborhoods in the country. I'll admit that my eyes kept glancing to make sure the car door was locked, and I prayed we'd make it to church safely and wouldn't end up in a ditch somewhere. Once there, my anxiety heightened as I realized we were virtually the only Caucasians among a sea of thousands. Subtle, subconscious cultural fears edged their way to the surface. Nervously, my friend and I moved through the crowd to a pew about five rows back on one side of the stage. I'm sure I flinched when a large man came up behind me and tapped me on the shoulder. But instead of asking what I was doing there or telling me I was in his seat, he held out a boulder-sized hand for me to shake and said with a broad smile, "We're so glad you could worship with us this day!"

He was the first of many. From in front of us, from across the aisle, and from three rows back, we were welcomed with such warmth and grace that I was put completely at ease, so much so that I (even I) swayed and clapped to the seemingly endless Gospel music. At one point the woman next to me said she was praying for me, and I felt as though she meant it.

Ninety minutes into the service Jeremiah Wright finally rose to preach. He spoke with intensity, force, and courage about the challenges facing the African-American community. He spoke about the dangers that poverty, apathy, and war place on our society. But he never once denigrated others or tore one group down to lift another up. He never once created barriers between peoples. In fact, he invited all visitors to rise, and he thanked us for our presence. He asked that when we returned to our home churches—be they black, white, or otherwise—we share prayers and blessings from the people of Trinity Church.

The choir at Trinity dressed in traditional African robes, and the longer I looked at them the more it occurred to me how much the robes resembled chasubles. It made sense, since all the people of Trinity Church served as priests to me that day, not priests who would walk blithely by on the other side of the road were I in desperate need, but ministers of grace who would lift me up with strong hands and say, “*You are my neighbor.*”

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“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” asks the lawyer. “Who are the Samaritans in our lives?” asks Jesus. How must *our* ways of looking at the world around us be broken open so that we can shed our subconscious prejudices and fears and embrace in true relationship all of our neighbors? Because only then do we enter into true relationship with our God. *Amen.*