

The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost
The Rev. Christy Dorn

07-15-07

Deuteronomy 30:9-14
Psalm 25:1-9
Colossians 1:1-14
Luke 10:25-37

From our first reading this morning we heard these beautiful words from Moses:

“This law is not beyond your strength or beyond your reach.
It is not in heaven, it is not beyond the seas.
No, it is very near to you.
It is in your mouth, it is in your heart.”

Jesus took these words of Moses to heart. These words helped him to look for his Father’s Spirit in everyone he met, bringing out what so often seemed to be lost. He’s saying that what we seek is within us.

“What must I do?” A lawyer came to Jesus with a question: “Teacher,” he asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The lawyer was looking for a loophole that would allow him into heaven.

“What is written in the Law? Jesus replied, “How do you read it?” The man answered—but his answer didn’t come from within; it came from the law he knew so well. “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, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” But the lawyer was still worried so he came back with another question, a tricky, dangerous question: “And who is my neighbor?”

This was a tricky question because Jesus had been accused of going further than the law. And going further than the law was to go against the law. The law originally restricted the idea of ‘neighbor’ to be other Jewish people and the strangers living in their country.

Jesus—who had been seen healing Romans and pagans—didn’t answer the lawyer’s question. Instead he told what would become one of the most well-known and important stories of all time:

a Jewish man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho,
when he fell into the hands of robbers.
They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away,
leaving him half dead.
A Jewish man passed by and ignored him.
Then another Jewish man with the equivalent of a Ph.D. in

religious studies did the same thing.
And then along came a social and political outcast who
took mercy on the Jewish man.
This was not a Jew and not a neighbor
but he bound up the man's wounds anyway,
and then took the man to a nearby inn where,
out of his own pocket, he paid for the man's care himself.

When he finished telling the story, Jesus asked the lawyer: "Who was the neighbor of that man who was beaten up alongside the road?"

The lawyer thought about his circle of neighbors.

He thought about the law, and then he said—this time from *within* himself-- "The one who took pity on him!"

While the first two men who passed by might have felt pity for the mugged Jew, their lofty positions in the synagogue stopped them from acting on that pity. It's not that they were bad people; it's not that they were lacking in their love of God. It's just that their religious obligations trumped their love obligations.

This makes me think that if I'm ever facing a life and death situation, I had better hope an unchurched person comes along. An unchurched person isn't going to come up with 6 or 7 religious reasons why he couldn't help me.

But in this story, Jesus does the unexpected in his choice of a hero. The one person forbidden from taking part in organized Jewish religious services is the one who follows God's command to be neighbor to all. God is in the neighborhood; God is in every single person I encounter, be it friend or foe. Loving God and loving my neighbor are inseparable. Your neighbor isn't just your own tribe or family or even your friends. Every person on earth is your neighbor.

But finding God in every person I encounter can be a challenge. There are times when God's voice rings loudly and brightly. During those times it all seems clear. The heart moves. We know in our bones what must be done. Like the lawyer, we see the law so simply drawn.

Ah, but the living of it, that is the challenge. Even after hearing the story of the Good Samaritan, we balk and repeat the question: who, indeed, is my neighbor?

The teetotaler might respond: surely not the alcoholic!
The border control officer might respond: surely not the illegal immigrant!
The fundamentalist Christian might respond: surely not the Muslim.
The person living in the gated community might respond: surely not the person living in the "projects."

Surely not—because...why? Because that person is so different from me? or because I'm in a hurry? Or because, if I help, I may get sued? Or because others will come along to help?

On our various “journeys to Jericho” we won't always be able to predict who our neighbors will be; nor can we predict when we might *be* a neighbor. The good Samaritan is the one whom we *don't* expect to stop beside us on the road; the one who would rather *not* stop and pick us up in our bruised and battered state; the good Samaritan is the one by whom we'd rather *not* be loved.

One of my favorite movies is one that came out about 10 years ago—*As Good As It Gets*, with Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt. The relationships that develop among the characters in this movie fit the Good Samaritan story so well. Nicholson's character is firmly established as reprehensible in every way, like the Samaritan. But he comes upon a couple of people—a gay neighbor beaten half to death, and the ill child of a waitress who doesn't begin to have the resources to reach the doctors whose expertise might change her child's world. And this unlikable, reprehensible boor helps them. He provides the doctor for the child; he takes the beaten man into his home. He cares. And the world of those he touches is changed—as unlikable as he is and as unlikely as that seems.

Each person is loved by God. We are the apple of God's eye. We were made to love God and our neighbor—even if we don't know either very well—or at all. To quote from Deuteronomy again, “This is not so mysterious. It's not in the sky or across the sea. It's near to us, in our hearts.”