

Lectionary 15C Proper 10 July 10, 2022

Deuteronomy 30:9-14 Psalm 25:1-10 (4) Colossians 1:1-14 Luke 10:25-37

Grace and peace to you, from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ...and the Spirit that continues to live and breathe and move among us.

I live on a small street in East Walpole. Killeen Road is a loop of houses that starts on Coney Street and curves right back around to Coney Street, 18 houses in all, if you count the two corner houses that have entrances on Killeen but addresses on Coney. We've lived there for decades, the second longest homeowners on the street.

It is a great place to live: right off Route One, but sheltered from the noise and traffic by trees at the crest of the street and wetlands behind it. We are just minutes from the Rte. 95 entrance, great for a quick trip north or south, and just minutes from the 90 acres of Bird Park with its trails and ponds, playground and tennis courts.

But the best thing about Killeen Road isn't a thing. It's the neighbors.

We have watered each other's plants, fed the fish and taken in mail and newspapers for vacationers. We have brought soup and groceries to those who were ailing and cookies for those celebrating. We have picked each other up at airports and train stations and ferried one another to medical appointments.

When it snows, the folks with snow blowers make the rounds of all those with no machinery or with old achy arms; young legs are always around to reach clogged gutters and saw off low hanging, broken tree limbs. Someone always comes up with jumper cables when a car won't start.

Back in the day there were trips with the kids to Paw Sox games and fishing up north. There were Christmas parties in December and block parties in September, with cookouts here and there all summer. The infamous blizzard of 78 found everyone sharing the contents of refrigerators and the warmth of outdoor grills, impromptu fire pits before they became a thing!

Some folks have moved on, of course, and some grown children have moved backed, buying the first available house on the street when they could. New folks have moved in, and are just as friendly as the old, just as ready to help.

Yes, there is the occasional early bird leaf-blower on Sunday mornings, the buddies that sing karaoke long into the night after holiday parties have officially ended, the kids whose balls and playthings stray into another yard, and one or two who manage only a brief hello, but we figure we all have our downsides and down days and can let a few things slide. We are neighbors, after all.

But if we listen to Jesus' story today, these are not my only neighbors. In fact, these neighbors – the ones who live close, the ones who interact regularly, the ones who mostly think and look like me – do not appear in Jesus' story at all.

No one is dangerous; no one is exploitive; no one comes from “the other side of the tracks”. No one is a fanatic liberal or die-hard conservative; no one is a zealot for or against religion. No one is even a Yankees fan!

This is not true of the Samaritan who stopped to help the traveler on the side of the road, and the supposedly faithful people who didn't. Those of us who have heard the story countless times know more details. Perhaps we learned in Sunday school or Vacation Bible school that the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a really dangerous, a long, rocky and often deserted place; that bandits attacked lone travelers and then waited to pounce again, even on those who might have stopped to help. Maybe at bible study we learned that Priest and Levites had certain rituals of purification that they had to follow around the dead and dying, although the truth is that assisting the injured was a higher requirement of those rules. Surely, we have heard that the Samaritans and Jews did not agree with or approve of one another, and would never call the other good - you heard it from me two weeks ago!

And yet, when it comes to someone lying helpless along the roadside the one who showed mercy, the one who acted in a good way toward the injured traveler was the Samaritan. The ones expected to be good, the religious authorities, looked the other way.

So it goes in a parable. The parable story form pits a familiar situation with an unexpected response, a response that is exaggerated almost beyond belief: laborers are paid a full

day's wage for an hour's work while the full-day crew looks on, feeling gypped; a wastrel son is given robes, jewels and a party upon return while his older brother fumes; invited wedding guests are turned away for a dress code violation while the local riff-raff are welcomed in. The shock value is meant to make us think hard about what we do and how we act and what it is that really matters.

Like any good rabbi, Jesus offers this story to the inquiring lawyer in response to the question actually asked: *Who* is my neighbor? *Who* must I love with my heart and soul and strength and mind? Or to be more honest, the lawyer trying to justify himself really wants to know *who* can I disregard.

The answer is everyone and no one: everyone is a neighbor and no one is to be disregarded. The victim is a neighbor, the Samaritan is a neighbor, and yes, the priest and the Levite are neighbors too. A neighbor is anyone in our path who is in need - of a smile, of a helping hand, of support, of physical assistance.

All it takes is to see that person and to come near. The Levite and Priest saw the man in the ditch, and probably a dozen other travelers did as well, but the one who came near was the true neighbor, the neighbor who saw and stopped; the one who washed wounds and provided transportation; the one who paid for medical care that day and checked back again the next week.

The real question in this parable is how to be a good neighbor, a way of being that is more than tsK tsK over someone's plight, more than best wishes and prayers, more than an occasional check to one's favorite charity.

In today's world the boundaries of neighborhood and neighborliness have been torn apart again and again by anger, fear, violence, and hatred. Stereotypes abound, pitting inner city youth against law enforcement; central American immigrants against border patrol; ethnic minorities against Caucasian majorities. The separation all too often results in risky behavior, injury and death: migrants perishing in a truck, shoppers gunned down in a supermarket, children dying in a classroom.

When I think about all the disruption in our world, and all the fear it engenders, my heart breaks. My hope wavers. My mind cannot wrap itself around the magnitude of the problems. Solutions seem impossible. How can this happen to someone, to someone's

neighbor? How can this happen *by* someone's neighbor? And yet, into the midst of terror there is hope: Christ comes. Christ sends neighbors. There is the man who uses his shirt as a tourniquet, the hikers who give up their day's outing to ferry an injured stranger down the trail, the child collecting toys for the children's hospital he recently left, the store-keeper bringing water to the fire victims nearby. One disaster at a time. One victim at a time. One neighbor at a time.

Being a good neighbor is listening long and hard to someone else's story and imagining life in someone else's shoes, even if just for a day and at a distance. Being a good neighbor is understanding the difficulties that our position in society save us from, so that we can extend our privileges to others.

Being a good neighbor is crying with someone else's pain, even if that someone is far away in Uvalde or Ukraine or Buffalo or Highland Park. It is holding someone else's anger and recognizing it as legitimate so that some change may be facilitated for that person and for society, rather than only judgement without treatment.

Being a good neighbor is acknowledging the humanity of every person no matter how like or unlike ourselves, allowing love not fear to be our first response to the stranger, treating others as we ourselves would want to be treated.

Parables invite us to enter into the story, to play a part so that we can get a feel for what is going on with each character. Who are we in this parable: the too-busy Levite? The unnoticed priest? The one lying on the road in desperate need? The one being a good neighbor by showing mercy? I know I have been each of these at some point - at many points - in my life.

Perhaps the better question is who is Christ in this parable? Clearly not the Levite or the priest: Jesus always found time to heal and comfort, to pay attention to the other. Christ must surely be the Samaritan who stops and helps beyond generously, giving time, attention and long-term care.

But maybe, just maybe, Jesus is the one lying in the road, the one waiting to be noticed, needing to be cared for, hoping to be loved.

Are we ready to be the caring neighbor, to give up our indifference to open our eyes and come near to those who are a little scary, a little far away, a little different? Are we ready to hang in there for the long haul, even when it is costly? Are we ready to be Jesus' hands and feet and heart and eyes?

Some thirty-five years ago Reidar and I and our three kids were outgrowing our little ranch house. When it got to the point that someone had to stand up from the dinner table so we could open the refrigerator door, we figured it was time for a bigger house. We looked at lots of them, drooling over the extra rooms and spacious kitchens. But then we looked at our neighborhood and our neighbors and decided we could always buy a new and better house but we couldn't buy new and better neighbors. So, we put on an addition and stayed right where we were.

We were only half right: we couldn't buy better neighbors, but we could become better neighbors. We could welcome new neighbors and we could make the lives of all our neighbors better, those right on our street and those who cross our paths at work or school or play, and those we meet through charitable organizations, the news and social media. We can make life just a little better every day for all our God-given fellow human beings, just by keeping our eyes and ears and hearts open.

The Samaritan, after all, was only one person. He helped only one person. It may not have changed the world of the first century, but it changed the world view of that one, and I imagine it changed the Samaritan's life as well, knowing he had saved a life. Wouldn't the world be a better place if each one of us helped just the one in front of us, reaching out with mercy as needed, and did so over and over and over again

May the Spirit help us to do just that.

Amen.

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