

Here is a silly story about being a good neighbor. My apologies if you already know it. Unfortunately, its quality does not improve with repetition.

A man was being interviewed by Saint Peter at the gates of Heaven. Peter was looking over the record of the man's long life and said, "You have not done anything particularly bad in your life, but it does not appear that you have done anything especially good either. If you can tell me just one good thing that you have done during your life, I will let you into heaven."

"Well, the man replied, "There was that time when I was traveling along a road, and I saw a group of thugs robbing a woman. I approached them and ordered them to stop. Unfortunately, things got a little out of hand and I ended up punching their leader. And then I challenged everyone else in the group to fight me."

"Wow," Saint Peter said. "That was a good deed, bravely coming to the assistance of the robbery victim. But tell me, when exactly in your life did this event take place?" The man replied, "Oh, about 2 minutes ago."

Here is another story about being a good neighbor. It is not intended to be funny. Instead, it is one of the best known of all the stories that Jesus told. Even people unfamiliar with the Christian origins of the story of the Good Samaritan know that to refer to someone as a "Good Samaritan" is to acknowledge an act of selfless and perhaps even courageous kindness that they have performed for another person, usually a stranger.

Jesus told the story – it is a parable – in answer to a lawyer's question about how to inherit eternal life. The lawyer knew that the law, as recorded in the scriptural texts of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, said that to inherit eternal life a person must love God and love their neighbor, but the lawyer wanted to know "who is my neighbor?" He wanted to know how to recognize the person he was obligated to love.

That is when Jesus tells the story of a Jewish man who was walking the notoriously dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked and severely beaten by robbers. Sometime later, three travelers encountered the beaten man. The first traveler, a priest, ignored the injured man by crossing to the other side of the road. Similarly, the second traveler, a Levite, walked on past without helping.

The people listening to Jesus were probably surprised, and possibly even insulted by his unflattering portrayal of the priest and the Levite because priests and Levites were prominent members of Jewish society and Jesus appeared to be disrespecting them. Besides, both men had excuses of sorts for not reaching out and helping. According to the law and traditions of the time, a priest was forbidden to go near a dead body, even that of his own parents, and a Levite who came into contact with what appeared to be a dead body would be considered ritually contaminated.

Jesus continued the story, no doubt shocking his Jewish audience with his description of the third traveler, the Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans had despised and distrusted each other for centuries, but Jesus said only the Samaritan upon encountering the injured man was "moved with pity." The Samaritan tended the Jewish man's wounds and paid for his accommodations while he recovered at a nearby inn.

Jesus does not give the Samaritan a name, and he does not indicate if the Samaritan was ever thanked for his kindness. The point of the story is clear: when practicing Christian charity and service, we are not to seek recognition.

The story completed, Jesus asked the lawyer, which of the three travelers was a neighbor to the man who had been assaulted? When the lawyer answered, "The one who showed him mercy," Jesus told the lawyer, and he is telling us, to "go and do likewise."

There you have it. If we, as Christians, ask Jesus the question "Who is my neighbor?" we had better prepare ourselves for a radical and quite possibly uncomfortable answer. The world in which Jesus lived was even more bigoted, racist, and divided by class distinctions than is our world today. Nevertheless, Jesus said our neighbor is anyone who needs the help that we can reasonably be expected to provide them, regardless of any cultural, or social, or political, or religious differences that might normally come between us.

When Jesus made the central character of his story a Samaritan, who in the eyes of a Jew was a disgusting heretic and the ultimate outsider, he extended the concept of “neighbor” far beyond any conventional understanding of the term. It was a radical thing to do. Jesus was saying that true neighborliness requires reaching well beyond those individuals and groups with whom we are comfortable and share common opinions and values and experiences. Yet again, Jesus defied stereotypes and turned preconceived notions upside down.

The parable of the Good Samaritan not only answers the question “Who is my neighbor?” it also demonstrates what it means to act like a neighbor. Jesus defined “neighbor” in radical terms, and throughout history there have been many examples of Christians who responded to God’s love by demonstrating very radically what it means to be a neighbor. Let me tell you about one such person

-Maximilian Kolbe was a Catholic priest imprisoned in the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz during the Second World War. As a prisoner, he was known for sharing his pathetically meager food rations with others who were starving. Despite the daily atrocities the camp guards perpetrated against the inmates, Kolbe encouraged his fellow prisoners to forgive their persecutors and overcome evil with good. A doctor in the camp who treated the patients in Kolbe’s prison block later recalled that Kolbe would not allow himself to be treated before any of the other prisoners. He repeatedly placed the wellbeing of others ahead of his own needs. The doctor said Kolbe’s virtuous actions did not appear to be momentary impulses, but were habitual, an extension of his personality.

One day a prisoner from Kolbe’s cell block escaped, and all the other prisoners were made, as punishment for the crime they did not commit, to stand all day in the hot sun without food or drink. At the end of the day when the escaped man still had not been found the camp’s commandant ordered ten prisoners be picked at random and thrown into a starvation cell where death was certain. The punishment was intended to warn any others in Auschwitz who might be thinking about escaping. One of the ten who had been selected for the starvation cell begged to be spared because he was worried his family would not be able to survive the treacherous concentration camp conditions without him.

As the man pleaded for his life, Maximilian Kolbe stood before the Nazi officer and said, "I would like to take his place, because he has a wife and children and I do not." The officer stood silent for a moment, trying to comprehend Kolbe’s request that he be permitted to die in place of the other man, his neighbor. Kolbe was tossed into the starvation bunker along with the other nine.

Over the next several days, guards removed from the starvation bunker the bodies of the prisoners as they died, one by one. But instead of hearing pleading and screaming from the inside the death chamber as was usually the case, the only sounds were of Kolbe and the remaining survivors singing hymns and praying. When Kolbe became so weakened by hunger he could no longer speak, he whispered his prayers. After two weeks only four of the prisoners, including Kolbe, were still alive.

Tired waiting for them to die, the guards killed the remaining four men by lethal injection. Kolbe, who regarded others as more important than himself, paid the ultimate price. It was a radical answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?”

Now I’m not suggesting that all of us must, or can, or should aspire to exhibit such a saintly example of neighborliness. But the value of Kolbe’s example is to help us put into perspective our own relatively puny challenges in expanding our understanding of who is our neighbor. The Good Samaritan, and Kolbe, were examples of reckless, spontaneous, indiscriminate love. There was no careful weighing or calculating by the Samaritan or by Kolbe the deservedness of the person needing help. They just did what needed to be done.

Jesus' message in the parable of the Good Samaritan is that we are to drop our tendency toward judging whether a person deserves our care. As always, this is much easier said than done. It would be much simpler if we could confine ourselves to helping the people we like, and those who can in turn do us some good. But Jesus calls us to love people we do not like, and people who can be of no advantage to us. In God's family, everyone is a neighbor.

One of my favorite writers, Jack Kornfield, put it this way. See if you agree. He said that all of us, without exception, have a deep longing to give to others, and if someone does not feel this deep longing it is because that longing was squashed or somehow suppressed by events in their life. But that longing to give to others is always there to be discovered. Therefore, one of the worst forms of human sufferings is being unable to find a way to love and to give one's heart and very being to others.

Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan highlights three contrasting philosophies of life.

The robbers' philosophy was "What you have is mine, and I will take it."

The priest and Levite had the philosophy "What is mine is mine, and I will keep it."

But the Samaritan's philosophy was "What is mine is yours, and I will share it."

Jesus endorsed the Samaritan's philosophy and said, "Go, and do likewise." And that is what we must try to do. **Amen.**

5th Sunday after Pentecost

10 July 2022

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