

“And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus gets asked that question in today’s Gospel reading. “And who is my neighbor?” This does not appear to be an innocent question. We are told that the man asking it was “putting Jesus to the test” and that he wished to “justify himself.” He knew the right answer from the Scriptures and the liturgy was to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and your neighbor as yourself. But by asking “And who is my neighbor,” he is, at the very least, implying that the Law is unclear. By asking this question, he’s saying that it’s necessary to define who is “neighbor” and who is not; that it is necessary to divide between “us” and “them;” that there have to be people who are not my neighbor. Is he right?

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Jesus responds by telling a story; one of his most well-known. It’s pretty provocative. Whatever their motivation, the religious professionals pass right by the victim. Jesus chooses to make the hero a Samaritan. Fine, upstanding Israelites considered Samaritans unclean for historical reasons. Marriage with a Samaritan was prohibited. There was even a saying, “He who eats the bread of a Samaritan is like one that eats the flesh of swine.” But in the script Jesus writes, the Samaritan is the noble one; the one who loves according to the spirit of the Law; the only one whose actions are neighborly. The conclusion is obvious and inescapable. Isn’t it?

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It is question that continues to haunt people who take Jesus’ words seriously. This incident makes it clear that a person can be well versed in Biblical Studies and know a lot of “right answers” and still insist on defining who is “neighbor” and who is not; still insist on dividing between “us” and “them;” still insist that “love your neighbor as yourself” is way too broad and open-ended. We’ve got to narrow it down to a manageable list of people who deserve our help. But Jesus just blew up that way of thinking with this story. Didn’t you hear the explosion?

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The man who asked this question seemed to expect Jesus to give him a list of who is a neighbor and who is not a neighbor. Did you notice? Jesus didn’t do that. He actually turned the whole thing around and paints a picture of what loving your neighbor looks like. It looks messy. It looks stressful. It looks like mercy. The man asking the question was looking for exceptions. Jesus tells a story that says, “Mercy does not make exceptions.”

So what makes this teaching anything more than an impossible ideal? Well, it’s this. If you remember, in the story, the Samaritan saw the half dead robbery victim and came to him in compassion. It was gut-wrenching for him to see this, so he did something

about it. He took action, at great personal cost and inconvenience. The person who told this story, Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary, Son of God, came to this world in compassion. It was gut-wrenching for him to witness the damage that sin had caused. So he did something about it. He took action, and it cost him his life. You and I will make no progress until we realize that we are the man half dead and Jesus is the one who does mercy as neighbor.

Human nature says, "I will act to love my neighbor as myself; just tell me who he is." But Jesus says, "You cannot act. You're barely alive. You need someone to love you, show mercy to you, heal you, pay for you, give you lodging, revive you. I've done all this for you to spare you. My cross means mercy for you. So with my mercy in your heart, go and be merciful."

Jesus asked, "Which of these three seems to you to have been a neighbor of the one who fell among the bandits?"

And he said, "The one who did the merciful thing for him."

And Jesus said to him, "Go and you do likewise."

Want to be astounded? With a faith connection to Jesus, you can do just that.