

“Who is my neighbor?” In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus gets asked that question. “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 this man wished to “justify himself.” He knew the right answer from Scripture 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 there must be people who are not my neighbor. Is he right?

“Who is my neighbor?” Jesus responds by telling a story; one of his most well-known. It’s provocative; intentionally so. In the story, religious professionals pass right by a robbery victim without helping. Jesus chooses to make the hero a Samaritan, a person that any upstanding Israelite would consider “unclean,” a total outsider to be avoided. But in the script Jesus writes, the Samaritan is the noble one; the only one whose actions are neighborly. The conclusion is obvious. Isn’t it?

“Who is my neighbor?” 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 that “love your neighbor as yourself” is way too broad and open-ended. Conventional wisdom says, “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.

“Who is my neighbor?” The man who asked this question apparently wanted Jesus to give him a list of who is a neighbor and who is not. But did you notice? Jesus didn’t do that. He turned the whole thing around. He turned it into a portrait of what it looks like to be a neighbor. And, to be candid, it looks messy. It looks stressful and inconvenient. It looks like mercy.

Or think of it this way: the man asking the question was looking for exceptions to the rule. Jesus tells a story that says, “Mercy does not make exceptions.” What do think about that? Be careful; your response says a lot about how you regard Jesus and His kingdom—which is founded on mercy.

If, truth be told, this story bothers you, please take another look. To summarize, the Samaritan saw the half-dead robbery victim, felt compassion, and took action, at great personal cost. Now consider: the man who told this story came to this world in compassion. He saw the damage that sin had caused. So He took action, and it cost him his life. Human nature says, “I will love my neighbor as myself; just tell me who he is, and if I like him, I’ll try.” But Jesus says, “Wait a minute. You need someone to show mercy to you. You need someone to pay for you, give you lodging, revive you. I’ve done all this for you. My cross is 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.”

But what does “being merciful” consist of? That’s an excellent question, and it turns out, this is something that God has been talking about for a long time.

Look no further than today's Old Testament lesson, taken from Leviticus chapter 19. If you want to literally look at it in your bulletin, I'd encourage that, or just listen as I read it again:

<sup>9</sup>“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. <sup>10</sup>And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God.

<sup>11</sup>“You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. <sup>12</sup>You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.

<sup>13</sup>“You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. <sup>14</sup>You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

<sup>15</sup>“You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. <sup>16</sup>You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the Lord.

<sup>17</sup>“You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. <sup>18</sup>You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

Did you see? Did you hear all the references to “neighbor” there? If you're not sure what being merciful to your neighbor is about, God spells it out: It is giving some of your abundance to the poor. It is dealing with others in honesty. It means not taking advantage of others from a position of power. It is treating people with integrity whether they can help you or not. It is to watch how you speak of others and to others. And it is especially about what you harbor in your heart—avoiding hate and the nursing of grudges, summarized in the phrase: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

When you hear a list like that, one thing becomes clear. Our problem is not that we don't know how to be merciful; our problem is that we sometimes just don't want to. We don't feel like being the good neighbor. Like the man who asked Jesus “Who is my neighbor,” we look to narrow the definition to something manageable, if not easy. If God's description of a merciful neighbor just seems a little to far beyond what you can muster, I actually have good news for you. You've identified something crucial. Being a merciful neighbor is not native to us. When you confess your inability to be neighbor to everyone in your path, not only will you enjoy the freedom of forgiveness, but you can catch Jesus' attitude of mercy and unselfish love. God is right there to help you in this; that's why each section from Leviticus ends with the words, “I am the Lord.” It's not as if we need the reminder of who is speaking; but we do need the reminder that the Lord God, with His Son Jesus and the Holy Spirit is the source of mercy and neighborly action. The more you focus on Him, the less you'll think “Who is my neighbor.” It's more likely you'll be thinking, “Where is my neighbor,” so that you can go serve them in the likeness of Jesus.