

SERMON  
July 15, 2007  
Proper 10 C  
“Who is my neighbor?”

“Who is my neighbor?”

That’s the question the lawyer put to Jesus in today’s Gospel lesson:

“Who is my neighbor?”

It’s really a devious question, isn’t it?

Because he’s asked Jesus what he has to do to obtain eternal life,  
and Jesus has reminded him of the commandment  
to love God and love your neighbor.

And rather than be satisfied with that answer,  
he’s followed up with this sly question.

This lawyer is pretty sharp.

He knows that if you don’t like the answer you get,  
you just keep asking until you get the answer you want.

Or else you twist the definition around  
and you play with words  
until you can justify your own position.

Jesus says, “Love God and love your neighbor,”

and he immediately comes back with,

“And who is my neighbor?”

The word for this is casuistry, or deceptive argumentation.

So Jesus tells him a story.

That's a very smart thing to do because stories are concrete.

They're about real people and real events  
and they force you think from the particulars  
rather than from the abstract.

Jesus tells him a story about a man who was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho,  
and he fell among thieves who robbed him and beat him  
and left him by the side of the road half-dead.

A priest came by but he didn't stop to help.

A Levite came by and HE didn't stop to help.

But a foreigner, a Samaritan, came by,  
and he stopped and washed and bandaged the man's wounds  
and took him to an inn where he cared for him.

"Now which of these three was a neighbor to this man," Jesus asks.

And the lawyer is forced to admit,

"The one who showed him mercy."

Who was the neighbor?

The holy man trying to keep himself pure? No.

The Levite looking to enter the temple? No.

The foreigner with the strange accent

and the funny clothes who is an outsider to our religion? Yes.

He was a neighbor, because he crossed the lines of purity  
and he showed mercy.

He got out of his comfort zone and he helped the one in need.

Who is my neighbor?

To me, the word 'neighbor' brings up the association of someone close to me.

The people who live around me.

The people I rub elbows with every day.

The people I associate with on a regular basis.

In other words, people very much like me.

I live in a world that is pretty monochrome, pretty safe.

I have a cultural white-zone I keep around me.

But I wonder how Jesus would answer that question for me today.

Who is my neighbor?

I have a computer problem and I call the phone number listed for technical help.

The person who answers has a thick Asian accent

and I can hardly understand him.

I can hear other people in the background in a vast call center,  
probably in India.

Who is my neighbor?

Katy and I go to our favorite restaurant and as I pay the bill,

I realize that all the workers in the restaurant are browned skinned.

Who is my neighbor?

A quick look through the shirt labels in my closet

show me that the shirts I wear were sewn by women

in India, El Salvador, Honduras, and Hong Kong.

Who is my neighbor?

I talk to my brother on the phone.

He's the engineer for a telecommunications contract in Alaska

and he tells me how hard it is to communicate with the Chinese workers

who are putting in the equipment

that was made by their firm in China.

Who is my neighbor?

I read in the paper that our carbon dioxide emissions

are changing the climate of our planet,

and the Sahara desert is growing larger and larger

and swallowing up everything in its path.

Who is my neighbor?

66% of all the roses and carnations in the store come from

Ecuador, Columbia, and Mexico.

I look at my beautiful flowers and I realize that

the hands that cut my flowers were brown hands.

Who is my neighbor?

I need some software and my son says,

“Wait a minute and I’ll go to Russia and get it for you.”

He taps on his keyboard

and I see Russian characters come up on his computer screen

and I realize that it is pirated software

and I say, “That’s OK, forget it.”

Who is my neighbor?

Hundreds of thousands of our young people

are coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan

with vivid memories of another culture, another place.

Who is my neighbor?

Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan

to make the point that my neighbor isn’t necessarily

someone who looks like me and thinks like me.

My neighbor might be a Samaritan,

someone who doesn’t look like me at all.

My neighbor might be half way around the globe.

We live in a world that is getting smaller and smaller.

It really is a global village.

We're no longer insulated from other cultures and other peoples  
by time or distance.

Everyone in the world can potentially reach out and contact every other person.

We're all neighbors now.

And we're all having to learn what it means  
to do cross-cultural communication.

We're all learning how to cross the gap.

I look around our city of Florence

and I realize there are different cultures right here.

There are people who work in the service industry,  
in restaurants and personal care.

There are retired people who have moved here.

There is a professional class of people.

There are people on disabilities,  
and there are an increasing number of Hispanic people.

How do we reach out across the gaps that divide us

and do ministry to these different cultures?

How are we to be a neighbor in our city?

I'm not really sure.

That's hard for me to do.

I don't really like the lawyer in the Gospel story,

but I do like the answer he gives Jesus.

When Jesus asks him which of the three travelers on the road

from Jerusalem to Jericho was a neighbor,  
he says, “The one who showed him mercy.”  
He got it right.

Mercy means to show compassion when you don't have to.

Most times we don't have to show compassion when there's enough of a gap.

But to be a neighbor means to reach out across the gap that divides you  
and show compassion.

Who is my neighbor?

Everyone is my neighbor.

Everyone on this beautiful blue planet of ours is my neighbor.

We have a lot of work to do.