

## “Who Is My Neighbor”

The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most familiar in the Gospels. But a good story is one that deserves to be retold. In order to appreciate the question that is this morning's sermon - "who is my neighbor?"-let's review it in context.

According to the story as told in the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, There was a lawyer who wanted to disconcert, or you might say, stump Jesus. So he stood up to ask a question (a questioner stands when they want to make an impression; then again I've never known a lawyer to deliver his case sitting down). He addressed the Rabbi saying: "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replied with a question: "what is written in the law? What do you read there?" The lawyer's answer indicated that he was well versed in the Hebrew Scriptures. His answer drew from the book of Leviticus: "you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind, and [love] your neighbor as yourself". Then Jesus like a good teacher affirms the lawyer, telling him that he had answered well, and says: "do this, and life is yours".

Still, the man, according to Luke's Gospel, was anxious to justify himself. And I find myself grateful to the lawyer for his further probing question: "And who is my neighbor?" To which Jesus replied: "A Man was once on his way down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers. They took all he had, beat him, and then made off, leaving him half dead. Now a priest happened to be traveling down the same road, but when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. In the same way, a Levite who came to the place saw him, and passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan (a word synonymous with 'alien' or 'heretic') came upon him and was moved with compassion when he saw him. He went up and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. He then lifted him onto his own donkey, carried him to the inn and looked after him. Next day he took out two denarii and handed them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Look after him, and on my way back I will make good any extra expenses you have'. Which of these", Jesus asked the lawyer, "do you think proved himself a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?"

"The one who took pity on him," replied the lawyer. Jesus said to him, "go, and do the same yourself". I think that we can all sympathize with the lawyer's question just as we are moved by the compassion of the Samaritan. The parable has so many different angles to it. The very word Samaritan spoke volumes. In choosing a man from Samaria for the hero of his story, Jesus might as well have chosen an alien or a heretic. They were all comparable to his listeners, faithful Jews of his time. Whereas the choice of a priest and a Levite as the two who passed the poor man by was a real put down of the clerical caste.

The life of Zora Neale Hurston, an African-American novelist, gave me a unique perspective on the great commandment that the lawyer quoted to Jesus ("you must love God with all you heart, strength and mind and your neighbor as yourself"). One of her novels made me wonder about the last two words - "as yourself".

I think of Zora Neale Hurston as the Alice Walker of the first part of the twentieth century. Literary critics say if it hadn't been for the racism and sexism of the times she would have been acknowledged in the same class as John Steinbeck or F. Scott Fitzgerald. In her autobiographical first novel, "Jonah's Gourd Vine", Hurston tells the story of her own mother's death. In the novel the daughter's name is Izzie. Her mother is in her midthirties and the daughter about nine years old. The story takes place in Florida, at a time when racism could not have been more oppressive. The dying mother's words of wisdom are borne out of an experience of compounded oppression - being poor, black, and a woman. You might say, as liberation theologians do, that her experience gave her access to knowledge not available to the privileged to those who belong to the status quo. The mother tells her daughter to stop her crying and listen even though she won't understand what her mother is saying now, although, the time will come when she will understand. Then the mother expands on the last part of the Great Commandment by saying: "don't you love anyone more than you love yourself, you do and you'll be dead before they strike a blow." She seems to be turning the commandment inside out or maybe upside down. It made me wonder if the part about self-love had been neglected to the detriment of loving one's neighbor or God. Which comes first? I'm not sure. What I experience is that when I'm feeling good about myself, I'm better at loving my neighbor and at being grateful to God for my life.

The author Doris Lessing, who at the age of 89 won the 2007 Nobel Prize for literature, seems to validate the wisdom of the mother in Zora Neale Hurston's novel. The main character of Lessing's five-novel sequence, "Children of Violence", is largely autobiographical. Her name is Martha Quest. At one point after a particularly stressful time, Martha retreats from her busy life for a month. During this introspective reflective time, she discovers within herself a formidable enemy, the only devil that she believes exists. It's a personal devil whom she calls the "self-hater". In announcing her Nobel Prize for literature, the Swedish Academy described Lessing as "that epicist of the female experience, who with skepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilization to scrutiny." She was also described as "the archaeologist of human relations", having written persuasively not only about female experience, but about politics, communism and black-white relations in Africa.

Had Zora Neale Hurston's mother lived, she would have been a contemporary of Doris Lessing. As different as their lives were, one survived as a poor black woman, the other being born in Iran to immigrant British parents, spending her childhood in Zimbabwe and finally settling in London. Still, their experience of being a woman was not all that different. If Zora's mother hadn't struggled with the 'self-hater' Doris Lessing discovered, she might not have known how crucial the last part of the divine commandment is to obeying the first and second parts. I don't believe that gender figured into the lawyer's question, 'who is my neighbor?', yet I have found woman's experience as articulated by Hurston and Lessing one that offers an enlightening perspective on the great commandment.

Albert Schweitzer is one male who as a Christian fervently kept this commandment. His brilliant life suggests that he may not have found loving himself all that difficult. On the

other hand he loved his neighbor more as an attempt to expiate - 'not for his bad deeds but for his good fortune'. In his 1933 autobiography, *Out of My Life and Thought*, he wrote of his youth: "it struck me as incomprehensible that I should be allowed to lead such a happy life, while I saw so many people around me wrestling with care and suffering." Garrett Keizer tells us in his book entitled '*Help: the Original Human Dilemma*' that as a child Schweitzer had refused to eat his soup because other children did not have any. Keizer quotes Schweitzer as saying: "those who receive beauty in life must return it. Those spared of pain must help share that pain with those who have it." Schweitzer said that he "could not recall a single day in his life when he had been completely happy". This sounds like a Buddhist Bodhisatva who refuses to enter the bliss of Nirvana until everyone is out of pain and suffering.

Dorothy Day in her own life of service to God in her neighbor speaks of "the help the helpless offers to the helpers". She says: "we reach out to help others as a statement of our own need for help. We are all beggars...We are all in more jeopardy than we dare acknowledge. When I offer bread to the hungry, I am feeding my own soul's hunger...when I offer someone a place to stay, I am reminding myself how homeless we all are..."

We are inspired by those who, each in his or her own way, expand our understanding of what it means to be fully human, to be Good Samaritans. This morning we are grateful for the presence of Samaritans among us, whether they identify as aliens, heretics, Republicans, Democrats or JUMP volunteers.