

"The Way of Jesus: Who is My Neighbor?"
A Sermon for University Congregational Church
Sunday, July 4, 2021
Rev. Paul Ellis Jackson

July 4th Celebration

Traditional Word

25 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink,[a] or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? – Matthew 6:25-26

Contemporary Word

"Jesus was not a man for others. He was one with others. There is a world of difference in that. Jesus didn't seek the rights of lepers. He touched the leper even before he got around to curing him. He didn't champion the cause of the outcast. He was the outcast. He didn't fight for improved conditions for the prisoner. He simply said, 'I was in prison.'

The strategy of Jesus is not centered in taking the right stand on issues, but rather in standing in the right place—with the outcast and those relegated to the margins." – Gregory Boyle, Jesuit priest

"The Way of Jesus: Who is My Neighbor?"

A couple of weeks ago, Keith Williamson preached on the church's spiritual architecture and how that architecture tells a story about our faith. He used the Good Samaritan story to model how we might use the Way of Jesus as a reminder of how we get back to paradise—which I spoke about last week. We are on a journey to Eden. We're trying to get home. To God. At least, this was the prevalent theological position during the middle ages. And to the medieval mind, religious edifices were

important testaments—proclamations, if you will—to the world about what the community that built the edifice believed. Churches and synagogues, and mosques are all spiritual way-points on our journey—places where so much human spiritual energy has been concentrated that you can feel the sacredness—the gravitas--the holiness of the site. Every faith tradition has physical artifacts of the tenets of that faith.

One of the tenets of Christianity is a love of neighbor. I've talked about this subject many times from this pulpit—so has Robin. When Jesus responded to the man who tried to trick him into a "gotcha" answer, he instead told him that the greatest commandment is to love God and love neighbor—on this hang all of the law and the prophets. To Jesus, his interpretation of Torah, of Jewish law, meant strict adherence to those foundational tenets. And as followers of Jesus, we try to do the same. So, just who is this neighbor we talk about so much?

Last summer, when I was in cardiac rehab for my new heart valve, because of Covid and the lockdown, my cardiologist allowed me the luxury of doing my cardiac rehab at home—for safety. You know I bike all through my neighborhood, and I know many of the people who live around me; well, walking last summer put me even closer to my neighbors. On my cardiac rehab walks, I would invariably end up in conversation with one of them. Before last summer, if you had asked me if I knew many of my neighbors, I probably would have said sure, a number of them. But it took walking around my neighborhood—it took a closer connection—it took

stopping and conversing and sharing and lamenting—it took getting close to really learn about my neighbors. And I did learn a few things that....

What about the neighbors I don't like? Do I have to love them? Sadly, the commandment doesn't give us a way out here. I suppose we can look for a loophole in our definition of neighbor, right? Let's expand it, not contract it. As I was researching this sermon, I came upon this fascinating story about the Tri-Faith Initiative in Omaha, Nebraska. Listen to this: Several years ago, the leaders of Temple Israel and the local Muslim community in Omaha had begun conversations about how their communities might share some land and maybe have a common parking area. The two groups started talking about their shared values and commitment to interfaith work; they expressed their mutual desire to foster hope for their children and for future generations; they recognized themselves as two Abrahamic faith groups, that is, two of the three faiths founded by Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Their conversations gave birth to an unlikely dream: wouldn't it be remarkable if all three Abrahamic faiths could partner to build three houses of worship on adjacent properties? They set about looking for a Christian church that might also share this dream. On April 12, 2015, Countryside Community Church (a United Church of Christ) voted to become the leading Christian partner, and the three congregations moved in side-by-side during August of 2020.

The rabbi of Temple Israel said: "This is something God wanted us to do a long time ago, and we were completely blinded by doing other things," He goes on

to say that "Jews, Christians, and Muslims have a history of working together here in Omaha. On September 11, 2001, he and his congregants helped protect one of the city's mosques. When Temple Israel voted a decade ago to move to the suburbs, leaders dreamt of a multi-faith worship campus. Almost a micro do-over of the Middle East. I acknowledge the remarkable results that the courage and vision of these three communities of faith have accomplished. Hope for the future. Love your neighbor, indeed.

Who else is our neighbor? Diana Butler Bass posits that the entire cosmos is our neighbor. In the late 1970s, I remember a book that everyone talked about: *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey. In my household growing up, my sister, Valerie (up there in the sound booth this morning), was a voracious reader, and I remember this book as being one that she read. I remember the cover--a dramatic picture of an exploding earth-- and all of the grown-ups whispering about the book's themes.

Hal Lindsey's book claimed that it had the answer to the end times—to God's plans. He claimed in his book that he knew the hidden meaning of history. He popularized the theory of dispensationalism, an idea that God has this elaborate plan and will divide the coming years into eras, or dispensations, of divine actions. It seems every few years; there is a resurgence of this type of fiction.

If you've ever gotten sucked into the hype (and fear) surrounding the *Left Behind* series of books, then you understand the attraction in this type of story. It feels delicious to belong to something unique that others don't, can't, or won't belong

to sometimes—our identities of holding secret knowledge are essential, especially if you want to create a belief system that appeals to a theology of fear. Critics, including most Christian theologians, reject this type of apocalyptic thought as escapist—"in its simplest form, apocalyptic speculation is a cosmic reading of history—a spiritual understanding of the universe—...[that] places people in a larger story while helping them find meaning in their place in time. Diana Butler Bass says the entire cosmos is our neighbor because the church represents the coming promise of God's unfolding future. We, the church—its people—we are the ones creating God's future. A theology of hope, not of fear.

Who else is our neighbor? What about our enemies as neighbors? Medieval Christians grappled with two cultures that venerated warfare. Even though Christians considered themselves to be pacifists, drawing from the example of Jesus, they eventually capitulated to the military culture of Roman society. The Roman army had oaths sworn to many gods, but mainly to Mars: The God of War. The soldiers sought his protection in battle and credited his power with the Empire's expansion.

In 312, the Roman Emperor Constantine secured his position and the throne through military force at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. This bridge was one of the main routes into the city, and it crossed the Tiber at a crucial access point. The night before the battle, Constantine had a dream in which he saw a cross in the smoke of battle, and God reportedly told him: "In this sign, conquer." He believes that God told him to use the cross as his herald, "In the sign, conquer," and he did so the next day—and his forces won the battle, ended the tetrarchy (the rulers of Rome until his

victory), and attributed his victory to the Christian God. His energies were then turned towards the legalization of Christianity since there were still pogroms and harassment taking place regularly with the state's blessing. No more. The Edict of Milan, enacted the following year, 313, gave Christianity legal status and a reprieve from persecution but did not make it the state church of the Roman Empire yet. That would occur in AD 380 with the Edict of Thessalonica.

When Rome fell, the new Christians found themselves facing another culture that venerated warfare—the Germanic tribes. These tribes lived in kinship societies based on bloody warrior bonds. As conversions to Christianity began to occur within these tribes, they started to blend the new ideas of the church into their violent ethic. This combination of Roman Military power and culture with the pagan warrior customs literally proved to be explosive. The fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries in Europe were a hellish mix of terrible violence, murder, rape, and pillage, mostly committed in the name of their new "Christ. There is a reason they are called the dark ages.

The church did what it could, going so far as to institute in 989 the "Peace of God," a rule that excommunicated anyone who attacked an agent of the church—anyone who attacked a bishop, priest, monk, clerk, nun, and it even extended to pilgrims, women, and children. Also, if you robbed a church or stole from the poor, you faced ex-communication as well. Excommunication meant you could not take Holy Communion, and therefore, according to their new belief system, their souls

were doomed to hell. This was a powerful motivator in achieving some level of compliance with their "Peace of God" rule.

This was followed in 1017 by the "Truce of God," which then extended the ban on warfare to the princes, nobles, and knights, and they swore to desist from all warfare and fighting from Saturday to Monday and during the holy seasons of Lent and Advent. Any warrior who fought and died on those days would be denied last rites, Christian burial, the forgiveness of sins, and any prayers for the dead. You can begin to see how an "ethic of warfare" began to be developed. And the church began to see how it could wield its power and mission more effectively by the denial of sacraments.

Who else is our neighbor? Butler Bass turns her attention towards the other creatures who share our lives: animals as neighbors. She states that we are called to care for the natural world because God, through Jesus, has taught us that it is in the natural world where we find everything we need for life: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink,[a] or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? – I know we sometimes tend to think of St. Francis of Assisi as a quaint, soft do-gooder who loved animals, but instead, when we think of his life of care for all animals, it should be read that he was a man whose views were drawn from a literal reading of Jesus's sermon on possessions.

The last group that Butler Bass brings up is the outcast. Father Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit priest who has spent his life working with Los Angeles gang members. For the past 30 years, Father G, as he is called, has mentored and counseled thousands and thousands of gang members who pass through his mission each year. Many leave their life of criminality and can reenter society. They come to learn job skills, get their gang tattoos removed, and attend therapy sessions on everything from alcohol abuse to anger management. Listen to Father G's words about the outcast: "Jesus was not a man for others. He was one with others. There is a world of difference in that. Jesus didn't seek the rights of lepers. He touched the leper even before he got around to curing him. He didn't champion the cause of the outcast. He was the outcast. He didn't fight for improved conditions for the prisoner. He simply said, 'I was in prison.'" The strategy of Jesus is NOT centered in taking the right stand on issues, but rather in standing in the right place—with the outcast and those relegated to the margins." Father Gregory cares for his neighbors because he knows we are all outcasts—humanity was expelled from the garden. We're just trying to get home.

I've recently taken to telling people that one of the main reasons I like coming to church is because it is one of the few places in our world today where we get to talk about love. Love is the Christian way of life, and Jesus's followers are called to model his way of love. It seems far too often that love is interrupted by acts of injustice—by actions not grounded in a love of God and neighbor. One of the teachings of the Way of Jesus is that we should live according to God's justice, a virtue based on respect for all living things that, in turn, serves the entire world—the

common good. We live according to God's justice, not our selfish desires. More and more, I'm convinced that God demands we love our neighbor because we are all in this together, and there is no escaping each other. Our proximity curses us. We are blessed, then, by recognizing that and holding open space for love.

AMEN

RESOURCES USED:

Holy Bible, NRSV

Diana Butler Bass. *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*, HarperCollins, New York, NY, 2009.