

Historic St. John's Episcopal Church, Richmond, VA
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 10, 2016
"And who is my neighbor?"
The Rev. William T. Pickering

I. The story in the Gospel for this morning is one of the best known parables of Jesus. We call it the parable of the Good Samaritan, focusing on the good deed done, but the story is about way more than that.

A. The lawyer asked about gaining eternal life in order to test Jesus, and in typical Rabbinical teaching, Jesus replied to the question with a question: "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" The Lawyer responded with the summary of the Law, and Jesus responds: "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

1. The lawyer then proceeds to press Jesus trying to catch him in some heresy or violation of the Law. "And who is my neighbor?" he asks. Possibly one of the most important questions asked in the Gospel and for us after one of the most horrible weeks for bias based random violence, ever.

2. It was not just a random thought to make the hero of the parable a Samaritan – it was critical to the message at the heart of Jesus' message.

3. Samaritans and the Jerusalem Jews did not get along. The Jews saw Jerusalem as the principle Holy place, while Samaritans believed that Jacob's well was the Holy Place. It does not sound like a big deal, but for the Jews there could be nothing good about a Samaritan. Samaritans were to be shunned and ignored, and any good Jew knew not to associate with a Samaritan – ever.

4. It is not clear whether the injured man was a Jerusalem Jew, though it could be assumed that he was.

5. The Priest and the Levite who passed by on the other side of the road were likely on their way to Jerusalem where they were to perform important religious rites. If they had touched a bloodied man, they would have been ritually unclean and could not have fulfilled their duties. They could not stop to help him because they had higher responsibilities.

B. The lawyer in today's story saw immediately that the Samaritan had been a neighbor to the injured man – not the religious folks, but it was a Samaritan. Jesus made his point that all are neighbors, and that we are to respect the dignity of every human being as we promise in the Baptismal Covenant. Without saying it, Jesus put the lawyer in the position of accepting that a Samaritan could have eternal life – by his own definition!

1. Our nationalistic, religious, cultural, racial, gender and class distinctions are putting a great deal of pressure on "Love your neighbor as yourself" command. We are rapidly losing sight of that simple rule of life and consequently facing violence that is tearing our country, our world, our neighbors apart.

2. The seeming need to circle the wagons around those who are like us and to exclude, belittle, demonize and even murder those who are different is making the world a most

dangerous place, and the message of the angels of “peace on earth good will towards all” is in grave jeopardy.

3. The critical question of the Gospel and for us was – and very much still is – “who is my neighbor?”

II. What is so sad is that it is incredibly simple, if we can get past the political and cultural rhetoric of fear and bias.

A. The teaching of Jesus is basic and simple – Love one another as you love yourself, do unto others in the same manner that you would like to be dealt with, love the Lord God as one ought to love the Creator of the universe who cared enough to send his only child to die for our redemption, don’t waste a lot of time judging others – there is enough for each of us to take care of in our own lives without meddling in others.

1. For the priest and the Levite the higher priority should have been the care of the injured man, rather than their religious duties.

2. That story is simple – a bit of religious non-sense – not really critical like the important things that we face? We would like to think that our racial bias, immigrant issues, gender biases, and religious issues are much more complex than in Jesus’ time – maybe they are, but that just makes the message all the more critical.

3. The political and cultural fear mongering that has become the norm has produced more than our share of Samaritans. The more we try to protect ourselves from our Samaritans the harder it becomes and the more violent we seem to become.

4. At the very least we need to remember who our neighbor is, and not succumb to the rhetoric, and proclaim by our words and actions that we respect the dignity of every human being.

III. In the midst of all the terrible violence of this past week – there was one rather wonderful piece on the Richmond News on Friday.

A. A black woman with her autistic son in the back seat of her car saw the flashing lights of a Henrico Police officer pulling her over for a traffic violation.

1. It was a white policeman and she panicked after all the news of white police being violent with black people. She was crying and shaking when the officer got to her door. She explained that her son did not speak, and that he was autistic, and the policeman realized how frightened she was.

2. He went back to the trunk of his car and returned with a teddy bear for the boy who smiled and thanked him – not common. The policeman was aware of the fear, and the woman recognized that not all white police are out to shoot black people.

3. There is hope – there can be reconciliation, hate and fear do not have to govern our lives.

B. We all know enough about the Word of God and the teachings of Jesus.

1. We know that we are to love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind, and that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves.

2. These are basic rules of civilized society and the means by which we become a community that cares for and about one another. The way the Kingdom is to be built.

3. We know that a Samaritan can be and often is as much my neighbor as anyone else – whoever our Samaritans may be.

3. Who is my neighbor? You tell me who is not.

Amen.