

Trinity 13

I take as my text today, from St. Luke's Gospel:

But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord my Strength and my Redeemer.”

We begin our liturgy every Sunday with a reminder: to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

According to our Lord, these are the two great commands for in themselves they sum up and fulfill the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

We are reminded to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind. If you really think about it, that is a Christian obligation of the greatest magnitude — we are to love God from the very depths of our being.

Take a moment to think about that. God should always be in our thoughts and in our hearts, and always the driving force in our lives.

But, is he?

What about our neighbor? How do we feel about the person next door; someone across town; or anywhere in the world, for that matter? Do we love others, that is other than family, as much as we love ourselves?

Generally speaking, I would dare to say that most Christians throughout the world feel they pretty well understand the first commandment — but, do they?

Do they, do we, understand the obligation that is incurred in loving God to the extent demanded by the First Commandment?

The obligation to worship God is part and parcel of our love of God — a part and parcel often neglected.

What about the second commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves? Not so simple as it may seem.

The difficulty, as some might suppose, is not just in deciding who exactly is our neighbor — it goes much deeper, reflecting also our love of God. Moreover, changes within our social framework over the decades, and more so in recent years, have led to individuals becoming more insular.

Modern technology has further complicated our lives when it comes to personal relationships by putting up an electronic barrier that removes personal interaction from relationships.

More and more, the dictionary definition of neighbor falls short of present reality, and of present technology. In the dictionary sense, the definition of neighbor as one who lives near by, or to live or be near to or next to has become outdated.

But, there is still the Biblical sense of neighbor. It is in the context of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, where we are confronted with the question, who is our neighbor, a context while old never ceases to be applicable, more especially from our Christian standpoint, even from just a basic human standpoint.

As always, it is when we put Biblical passages into the context of the times they were written, that we find clarity. The parable poses and then answers most clearly the question of who our neighbor is by defining neighbor as a fellow human being.

Of all the parables in the Bible attributed to Jesus, between 30 and 75, depending on how one counts them, the Parable of the Good Samaritan is perhaps one of the most unforgettable.

Interestingly, all three of the Synoptic Gospels — Matthew, Mark, and Luke — discuss the encounter with the young lawyer who questions our Lord on the definition of neighbor, but only Luke relates the story of the Good Samaritan, which punctuates the law Jesus has delivered.

While from earliest times, the approach used to give understanding to the parable has been allegorical, in contrast, if we view the parable simplistically, I think it retains its flavor, and delivers its message most emphatically, and brings home exactly the point Jesus was making to the young lawyer who poses a seemingly simple question: "Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

Now the lawyer was not a lawyer in our modern sense of being a lawyer; rather, he was, by profession, one occupied with the "Mosaic Law," It was his business to interpret the "Mosaic Law" and provide guidance on how to relate the law to one's life, relating the law to behavior.

Furthermore, the lawyer knew that, under the "Law," no Gentile was considered a neighbor; neighborliness was restricted to the Jews within the covenant.

The lawyer confronts Jesus with a question essentially on how to obtain life in its fullness. Jesus responds in the technical terms of his questioner and throws the question back: "What is written in the law, how readest thou?"

The lawyer answers with the Shema, the necessity of loving God. Jesus commends him.

But the young lawyer, desirous of further instruction, asks: "Who is my neighbor?"

The answer is given in the parable of the Good Samaritan. But, in answering the young lawyer, Jesus really turns the whole question around; not "Who is my neighbor?" but rather "Whose neighbor am I?"

It is a beautiful and graphical story of a traveler who is waylaid by thieves and robbers along the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The road, really just a well-traveled path, was treacherous. It was circuitous and lonely, and home to thieves and robbers, just unsafe. Priest and Levites, because of their religious calling, generally were not bothered and usually made the passage unmolested.

Along this way, a certain man fell victim to the thieves and robbers. We are not told who the man is, whether Jew or Gentile. Beaten and robbed, he lay on the roadside half-dead. Those who left him there were sure he would be found dead.

By chance, a priest approached, perhaps returning from his turn of office in the temple, a priest, a man consecrated to God, a spiritual leader who most certainly would be prepared to show mercy to a stranger injured on the roadside.

Not so. The priest, schooled in the Law and certainly aware of loving God and his neighbor, quickly passes to the other side of the road and hurries off.

Another coincidence, a Levite approaches, also, a servant of the temple, a minister of religious worship, and an interpreter of the law. Again, this man must certainly be prepared to respond to the wounded man.

Just as the priest, he quickly passes to the other side of the road and hurries off.

So far, in our story, we have seen two religious leaders, who should have been the first to translate their faith in God into action by aiding a poor unfortunate soul along the way. Perhaps here we are seeing what our Lord saw: a heartless, compassionless religion.

Finally, another individual approaches, a Samaritan, an outcast, half-Jewish, half-Gentile, with whom no Jew would have dealings.

But rather than hurry off, the Samaritan stops, dismounts, and kneels beside the poor man. He gives him, for that day, "first aid" by pouring oil and wine on his wounds and applying bandages. He sets the man upon his mule and leads the animal and its burden to an inn along the way.

There, he stays the night with the man, caring for him,. The next morning he makes provision for his continued care, with a promise to repay any additional expense on his return.

Now, can you imagine the look on the young lawyer's face when Jesus reveals the Samaritan as the rescuer; this Samaritan being the only one who would take the time and effort to care for this injured soul?

What a turn-about!

We must keep in mind that this was certainly not an indictment of all religion. Jesus was not indicating that all religious representatives were cruel and all Samaritans tender-hearted.

More to the point, Jesus was addressing this parable to a Jew in a way in which he could most readily understand. It was a strike at the opposite poles around which a vain Jewish life revolved — that is, trusting in their own righteousness while at the same time despising others.

Jesus, in recounting this parable, was not pitting the cruelty of one against the kindness of the other. His parable was so constructed that the lawyer was humbled in regard to his self-righteous trust in his birthright as a Jew, while at the same time exalting the lowly Samaritan for his compassion.

Who of the three was the neighbor?

The lawyer responded, "He that shewed mercy on him."

"Then, said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise."

If we are to understand this parable; indeed, if we are to comprehend what we as Christians should practice; then, we must put aside the dictionary concept of neighbor, and we must confront the changing concept of personal relationships in this modern electronic age.

Indeed, we must break through barriers and embrace an universality in defining neighbor as "anyone who needs me."

This does not mean that we, as Christians, are to allow ourselves to be taken advantage of in our efforts to help those in need. As we all know, there are many who play upon our vulnerability as Christians, our compassion and desire to emulate our Lord.

This does present a challenge to us. While we feel compelled to help when we see a need, we are, at the same time, repulsed by those who abuse our Christian generosity.

The point of this parable is not to undermine rationality but to open hearts and encourage charitableness.

We are told to love our neighbor as our self and the parable challenges us to rethink what a neighbor is. Thus, in the Christian concept, neighbor takes on a broader meaning that goes beyond the normal boundaries to include our fellow human beings everywhere, especially those in need.

Within reason, the Christian can know no barriers; Christian love must have no limits; for true Christian neighborliness reveals itself in mercy.

Thus, as we journey through life and "by chance" come upon someone in need, whether physical, material, or spiritual, then we have come upon a neighbor; we have been presented the opportunity to be a reflection of the Good Samaritan Himself, Jesus Christ. If we are to be a reflection of the love that emanates from Christ, then we must assist in whatever way we can, not irrationally but kindly and lovingly.