Book 8

Sunday September 16, 1979

"WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?" Luke 10:25-37

I suppose that each person hearing this sermon this morning would want to be of help to his or her neighbor in an emergency if at all possible. Our difficulty is not so much in our willingness to be of help to persons whom we consider our neighbors, but like the lawyer in the story from the Gospel of Luke, we're not always sure who our neighbor is. We normally define neighbor as a person who lives next door or in the same block, or just down the street, and as someone whose name we at least know.

This is one valid definition of the term, "neighbor." In the church neighborhood meetings we've been publicizing so much lately, we've been using the word neighbor and neighborhood in the sense of those living in the area where we live. Of course in the broadest definition of the word neighbor we would include those of our own racial background, those of the same ethnic origin, those of the same religious background.

But there's another way to answer the question, "Who is my neighbor?"

One day a lawyer asked Jesus, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responded with another question--"What is written in the law?" or in other words, what does your religion tell you? The lawyer knew the right answer. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." "You have given the right answer," said Jesus, "Do this and you shall have eternal life."

But the lawyer had a follow-up question, "Who is my neighbor?" "How can I practice love of neighbor when I'm not sure whom I'm supposed to love? Is my neighbor anyone, anywhere? Are there any limits to the term, "neighbor?" The lawyer didn't ask what the word "love" meant in this context.

Then Jesus told a story which defined the word "neighbor" and defined the word "love." "A man was going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho." The traveler was mugged, robbed, beaten, and left injured by the side of the road.

Not long after a priest came along the same road. The injured traveler seeing the priest probably thought to himself, "here is my salvation." But when the priest saw the man in the ditch, he walked as far on the other side of the road as possible as though he didn't see the injured person at all. Maybe the priest thought to himself, "O God, the poor fellow! Lucky it didn't happen to me. Should I help this poor man?" But perhaps the priest also thought, since he was a thoughtful person, "Who is my neighbor," and his definition of neighbor was a very narrow one, and since he was thinking as he was walking, he had already passed by the injured man, and he just kept on walking.

He had closed his eyes to the problem. There are certain things and certain people we do not want to see. There are certain things we do not want to admit. Better to close our eyes and our minds to such problems and not admit they exist and perhaps they will go away.

But the very things we do not want to see may be the things that we should see. There were atrocities we committed during the Viet Nam War, but many of us did not want to see that or admit it. It was difficult for us to watch the T.V. series "Roots" a few years back, or to watch the series on "Holocaust" which was re-broadcast this last week. Some of us do not want to know that in other parts of the world and in our own country, there are people who do not have enough food. It's better to be like the priest and walk by on the other side, eyes straight ahead and only think about such things in the abstract and debate the ethical questions but never get our hands dirty.

It can be very easy to excuse ourselves from being of help to those in need if we keep our eyes closed to the fact that they are in need.

A Levite came down the same road and he too passed by on the other side. Perhaps he had similar thoughts to those of the priest. Maybe he had a lecture on neighborly love to deliver that evening in Jericho, and so he made some very quick and precise calculations: "If I get held up with this poor man, I'll miss my lecture. If I stop here I would be helping only one person, whereas my lecture on love may touch off a movement which will make all of society more loving.

The third person to come down the road was a Samaritan. To the listeners in Jesus's audience, a Samaritan was about the same as being a heathen. They didn't hold the correct beliefs. They had wrong ideas about God. But with the Samaritan there was no calculation, no abstract reasoning, "should I help this man or not, after all, he's probably a Jew and Samaritans and Jews have no dealings with each other." Or, "who is my neighbor or what does love require?" He simply did what was necessary. He bandaged the man's wounds, then put him on his donkey and took him to the nearest inn and saw to it that he was properly cared for.

"Which of these three," asked Jesus, "proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers." The answer is obvious and the lawyer gave it, "The one who showed mercy." "Go and do likewise," said Jesus.

As we face similar questions in our lives, note these points about "Who is my neighbor," and what "love of neighbor requires."

1. First, Jesus Christ is defining neighbor as anyone who is in need. Neighbor is not defined by where a person lives, what the person's ethnic origin is, or social class, or religious background, or whether we know the person or like the person or agree with the person's point of view, or agree with the person's politics or whatever.

Rather, Jesus Christ with this story turns the lawyer's question around--if we are to practice love of neighbor then the proper question is not "who is my neighbor?" but "to whom am I called to be a neighbor?" Who is laid at my door. Who is expecting help from me and looks upon me in that moment as his or her neighbor? The reversal of the question is precisely the point of the parable.

2. Note secondly, that part of our problem with the whole concept of "love of neighbor" is not only our limited definition of "neighbor," but our limited definition of love as well.

For the past several centuries, we Christians have often thought of "love" mostly in intimate personal terms. We have usually defined love of neighbor as a relationship of personal friendship between several people or of one person personally doing some good deed for another person.

Certainly "love of neighbor" does have this aspect to it. Furthermore each one of us needs some relationships of personal intimacy and trust. Much of a person's meaning and purpose in life comes from his or her relationship with other persons. We need to know that we are cared for and valued by other human beings. We need to know our neighbors. This part of the meaning of love of neighbor we are trying to accomplish in a small way with our parish neighborhood meetings these coming weeks.

However there are also other ways to carry out the love of neighbor because the Christian definition of love is more than just being personal in each and every situation. Justice is also a form of love. Martin Luther King, Jr. used to say over and over again, "What we black people want is justice, to be treated justly. I don't care whether or not you like me as an individual or whether we become close personal friends--the issue is justice as a form of love.

The New Testament repeatedly describes love of neighbor as a readiness to serve others in their particular situation; to do good for them in the face of their specific need; to use the most satisfactory resources in the most effective way. There is no requirement that only personal resources should be used. We do not have to come into a personal relationship with the persons in need. That may be the least of what a person or group of people needs at that particular time.

There can be as much Christian love of neighbor being practiced if a person uses his or her skills to work at providing jobs for the unemployed as there is in bringing baskets of food to families which are hungry because the wage earners in the families are unemployed. And the fact is that a person will most often be working through institutions to provide jobs and this kind of working may not bring a person into some kind of direct or personal relationship with the persons who are out of work, but that doesn't make it any less a practice of Christian love.

Many of us may get a good feeling out of personally taking a basket of food to a family at Thanksgiving or Christmas, and that's all right, but it's just as much a practice of Christian love of neighbor to work patiently to help build the kind of society where fewer and fewer people need Thanksgiving or Christmas baskets.

It was the right thing for the Samaritan to do when he helped the injured Jew. It was practicing love of neighbor. But it would also be carrying out love of neighbor if he and others were to work at providing effective police protection along the road from Jerusalem to Jericho so that fewer robberies occurred. Prevention never seems as heroic and it rarely makes the headlines but it can be just as much a practice of love of neighbor.

In our time, we might stop to help a motorist who had an accident or someone else in need. But we are also practicing love of neighbor when we work for safer automobiles and safer highways, better driver education and all that goes with it. Doing such things is not always as sensational as rushing someone to the hospital in an ambulance with sirens screaming.

Furthermore the goal of our love of neighbor is not to bind someone or group to us so that they feel they owe us something or to get them to feel grateful towards us; rather the goal is simply the service to the other in respect to his or her particular need. The goal is that justice be served. Sometimes our practice of love of neighbor may be very personal and at other times there may be little that is personal at all. Giving to United Way, "Neighbor in Need," etc.

Note this also--anyone who practices love of neighbor needs always be prepared to have his or her plans interrupted. Many times the neighbor's needs are presented to us at inconvenient times. It seems that God is always compelling us to improvise. Often God's tasks have something about them which is surprising and unexpected.

God is a God of surprises, not only in the way that God helps us and in the strange places that God meets us, for God's help often comes from unexpected directions, but also in the manner in which God confronts us with tasks to perform and the people which come across our path.

Particularly if we keep our eyes open and don't try to pass by on the other side like the priest and Levite, we will meet some surprising neighbors. Amen.