

Who is my neighbor?

Who is my God?

Luke 10:25-37

It's funny how many people speak of Jesus as "*the answer*" when he so rarely gives a straight one! Today's Gospel is a perfect example. Jesus never answered the lawyer's questions. Instead, he questioned the lawyer's answers. Maybe we should think of Jesus not as *the answer* – open and shut case, 'the answer is Jesus, now what was the question you were asking?' – rather we should think of Jesus as the one who unsettles our minds and hearts and leads us to question our pat and easy answers.

The Good Samaritan is one of Jesus' most familiar stories, perhaps the only one to have been commercialized into a club that offers discounts and benefits to RVers – *the Good Sam RV Club*. The problem when a Gospel story becomes so familiar is that it loses its freshness. We assume we know everything there is to know about the story. Jesus challenged and expanded the lawyer's (and our) understanding of compassion. The moral of the story is for us to be the one who goes and does like that despised yet compassionate Samaritan. Be a neighbor; show mercy to the one in need. We all know this is the moral of the story.

But this morning I'd like to look again at Jesus' beautiful and familiar parable of the Good Samaritan and ask a different question. "*Who is my neighbor?*" asked the lawyer who wanted to justify himself. Typically we look at this parable from the lens of *neighbor*. Today I'd like to turn that perspective on its head and look at the story from the perspective of *God*. Where is God in this story?

Where was God for that lawyer who wanted to challenge Jesus and justify himself? God was obviously important to him. He clearly understood the first commandment as the call to love God with his whole heart, soul, strength and mind. God was present for him also in the almost unimaginable gift of inheriting eternal life. Except for the lawyer it wasn't a gift. Eternal life was something that had to be earned. "*What must you do?*" For the lawyer – and this was a lawyer not in the sense of a modern lawyer who helps a client with matters of civil or corporate law, but rather an expert on God's Law, a scripture scholar – the gifts of God were divvied out to those who earned them. The emphasis was on duty. *What must I do?* God, for the lawyer, was the giver of rewards and punishments.

Where was God for the poor fool who walked the Jerusalem to Jericho road alone, got beat up and robbed? It's not hard to imagine his prayers. "*Lord, help me. I'm broken and bleeding. I'll die if you don't send someone quick. Please send someone to help me.*" And when someone came, it didn't matter at all, if the victim was even conscious at this point, that help came at the hands of a despised outsider. A wounded American soldier in Afghanistan being helped by a member of the Taliban would be no less surprising and no less an answer to prayer. God, for the victim, was present in the one who came to his aid.

Where was God for the Samaritan? We can be sure that for him God wasn't in the Temple in Jerusalem. God, in his view, would have been more concerned for the Samaritans than for the Jews. He would not have heard Jesus' parable of the last

judgment where the King separates the just from the unjust solely on the basis of how they treated the one who was hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and in prison. *“As you treated the least of them so you treated me,”* the King told those being judged. He wouldn’t have heard that parable and yet he instinctively understood it. God for that Samaritan was present in the man bleeding and dying in a ditch off to the side of the road, the man for whom he had compassion.

What about the Levite and the priest who each, seeing the victim on the road, passed by on the other side? God was in the Temple. Both of them were on their way to Jerusalem and the Temple of God to do their duty of loving God with their whole heart, soul, strength and mind. If the man by the side of the road was dead and they touched him they would become ritually unclean and would have to delay their duty to God and Temple. They were so focused on their duty that it never occurred to them that God might be more present in the interruptions than in their duty. The other day I was fishing in my kayak. I was heading towards a break wall, but trolling a lure on my way. I caught two blue fish, one right after the other. I could have then focused on fishing in the area where I caught the two blue fish. But no I stubbornly persisted in continuing on towards my destination at the break wall, where naturally I caught nothing. Because I was so focused on where I was going I missed out on the real action. God might be more present to them in the midst of their journey than at the journey’s end. The priest and the Levite each missed out on meeting the living God in their compassion and care for the broken victim as they ignored him and rushed ahead to try and meet God in his holy Temple.

And what of Jesus? How is Jesus showing us something of God in this familiar parable? Matthew and Mark tell of a different confrontation between Jesus and a lawyer or scribe. Matthew and Mark’s encounters take place in the Temple in the increasing hostility between the authorities and Jesus leading up to his arrest. A lawyer asks Jesus a question to test him. *“Teacher,”* he asks, *“which commandment in the law is the greatest?”* Jesus replied, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”* (Matthew 22:34-40) Jesus’ answer is not much different from the lawyer who follows up with the question about *who is my neighbor*, except for one important distinction. Jesus said *“and a second (commandment) is like it.”* Jesus links loving God and loving neighbor.

Do you remember the story of creation where God made the day and night and the stars and planets, the earth and sky, the waters, plants, birds, animals, fish and finally made humankind, men and women in God’s own image? To have compassion and love for our neighbor is paramount for Jesus to loving God. Jesus himself embodied that holy image of God in a way that none of us could. He incarnated it. Jesus showed us what the image of God untarnished, unstained by sin and selfishness, looks like. Jesus showed us God’s image in human form through his compassion and service and love for others.

A few verses before the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem and began to lead his disciples there away from their home in Galilee. Like the priest and the Levite Jesus was headed to Jerusalem, but not to find God in the Temple. Jesus’ mission was to offer God’s love for all the broken, hurting people in the world – for you and me and for everyone who ever lived. His love rescues you and me

just as certainly as the Samaritan's compassion rescued that victim of assault and robbery.

Last, I need to ask, where is God for you and me in this parable? Is God found in the vulnerability of compassion to those in need? Is God found in our neighbor? Is God to be found in each and every one of the hundreds of millions of people in need here and throughout the world? Is God found in the human needs that catch our attention? And if God is present in all those human needs and in our compassion and response to those needs, does God put any limits on our compassion? Where is God if he is not to be found in the needs of my neighbor?

I invite you to pray with me the prayer of St. Francis.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.