

Neighbors

Luke 10:25-37

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The passage that we just heard from the Gospel of Luke is a familiar and well-loved part of the Christian tradition. It is also widely recognized as speaking a universal truth. In virtually all religious traditions, and in secular societies as well, the matter of "neighbor" is one of constant and great importance. The story that Jesus told informs and challenges us, still, about how to be neighbors.

We see here what we often see in the Gospels – that Jesus never answers the question that he is asked. In response to "and who is my neighbor?", he replies with the splendid story about the good Samaritan – which answers a very different question. Jesus ends the story with a question of his own: "which of these three was a neighbor to man in need?"

The way that Jesus re-framed the question was brilliant.

The question that he was asked tried to find boundaries. How far do I have to go in extending love? Is it my family, the people next door, in a nearby town? The Jewish law and prophets keep making claims about care for the "stranger and sojourner", the "widow and fatherless" – do I really have to love them? What about people who are not Jewish? The occupying Roman army?

The question tries to pin down the dividing line between "we" and "they." Who's in and who's out? We want to know who the neighbor is, so that we know who is outside the moral circle. Who do I need to think about, and who can be invisible? Who isn't deserving of my moral concern?

The answer that Jesus gave to the boundary-setting question discarded the categories that would shape boundaries. Rather than discussing dividing lines, he led his audience into reflection about neighborliness. He made it obvious that the "who" is far less important than the "how." It is neighborly action that really makes a difference.

Of course, we do keep wanting boundaries. We still want an answer to the "who is my neighbor" question. But the parable that Jesus told implies that the categories of "neighbor" need to be stretched to surprising levels of inclusiveness.

In my work with Eco-Justice Ministries, I'm often asked about Bible passages that tell us to care for the environment. I usually don't talk about the creation stories in Genesis, or the Psalm that affirms that "the earth is the Lord's." I'm most likely to refer to this parable, and to the commandments that support it.

"Love God, and love your neighbor." That is a perfect basis for the principle of eco-justice, which holds together social and economic justice in human communities, and ecological health for the planet. Those far-reaching ecological and the justice components become self-evident when we claim an expansive and inclusive definition of "neighbor."

To all people.

On some level – both emotionally and in our thought-out ethics – we all know that our neighbors live all around the world. We are part of the human family. We feel that tug of neighborly obligation when we hear about disasters on the far side of the planet, or when we see homeless people asking for help on a street corner.

But it is probably true, too, that our day-to-day lives are built within a fairly narrow circle of neighborliness. We are most neighborly with our relatives, the people who live next door, our friends and co-workers. On its most basic level, this story always challenges us to stretch out the circles of our neighborly and compassionate relationships.

But my point today has more to do with a broader field of morality and ethics than with personal actions. The twist that Jesus put on the question asks, "Are there people who stand outside of our circle of moral concern?" That question gets at public policy and economic systems, as well as our personal actions.

The neighbor question is very pertinent for us today in US. Who gets to be "normal" or "real"? Who fits into our circle of concern? And how do we live that out our neighborliness?

One of my core ethical assumptions is that the commandments about "love God and love neighbor" – when taken in the spirit of Jesus – always call us to the very farthest expansions our circles of ethical concern. Ultimately, there is no one who is outside, no one who is morally insignificant, no one who is not "one of us."

This is Labor Day weekend, where we celebrate (or at least acknowledge) the progress toward decent pay and working conditions for those who labor in our society. In the industrial world and with farm workers, the labor movement has called us to expand our notions of neighbor, and to be just in our relationship with workers.

The bitter political battles about immigration are an indicator of where many people in this country draw the lines about us and them. Border walls and deportation are designed to preserve our wealth, and to exclude those that our society has described as "other". If we see those people from the south as our neighbors – and it is primarily the southern immigrants that are controversial – then we will be inclined toward a more open immigration policy, and we will be more likely to deal constructively with the poverty and violence in those other countries that is driving folk to cross the border.

When we are called to be neighborly, to enact our love, we do so in the context of the whole global community. All people are part of the family. None of them are expendable or worthless. In this global community, loving our neighbor isn't just a nice thought about folk on the other side of the world with whom we have no connections at all. We are intimately connected economically and politically. These days, our ethics have to work on a global scale.

Walk through the grocery store, and become aware of where your food comes from: California and Florida and Mexico – not to mention coffee from Central America or Africa, grapes from Chile, soy and beef from Brazil, lamb from New Zealand, and fish from world's oceans. We are tied economically and morally to those who grow and process our food. When they are impacted by dangerous agricultural chemicals, by deforestation and soil depletion, then neighborliness will not allow us to "walk by on the other side."

The reality of our global community is driven home by the reality of climate change. Our burning of fossil fuels is creating a crisis that hits especially hard for the poor and powerless around the world. On the most basic level, it is not "neighborly" for our affluent society to knowingly pollute the atmosphere, and to cause damage to our fellow humans who live around the globe.

To future generations.

There is another stretch to our circles of concern. As we start to come to grips with big and complex environmental issues like global warming, shortages of fresh water, finite supplies of oil and gas, and the collapse of global fisheries, it becomes obvious that it is not enough to see our human sisters and brothers of today's world as neighbors. We need to stretch our notion through time as well as space.

We live in a time of remarkable change. A few hundred years ago, people could assume that they would live in much the same way as their parents and grandparents, and that their children and grandchildren would share in that continuity. Today, we find that change is always present. We move frequently, we surround ourselves with new technologies and products, and our social roles are fluid. We have no expectation that the world in 50 or 100 years will have much resemblance to what we know now. This is a new ethical problem for us. Never before have we needed to imagine such a profoundly changed world for our descendants.

It used to be that caring for your own community brought with it some sense of caring for the future of that community. We can't assume that anymore.

So our ethical circles also have to expand to consider the needs of future generations. Among our neighbors, those people are truly voiceless, because they don't exist yet. They

can't stand in front of us to speak about their rights, their interests, their needs and their values. It falls to us, as a matter of faith and ethics, to stand on behalf of those neighbors.

The need to act as neighbor to future generations is not a moral abstraction. We see that need in today's headlines.

Consider our often thoughtless and wasteful use of fresh water. Here in Colorado, and around the world, water is being mined from ancient aquifers that will not recharge for thousands of years. If we over-use it now, that water source will be gone, unavailable to future generations. We see similar concerns in the loss of valuable topsoil, eroded and degraded by short-sighted farming practices. We are burning through oil and gas at a frightening pace, depriving our grandchildren of these essential resources.

And we certainly encounter the needs of future generations when we acknowledge the reality of global climate change. The excessive levels of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses that are already in the atmosphere are having a strong impact now, and they will continue to warp the climate for centuries. The more of those pollutants that are released, the more catastrophic those impacts will be. Every decision that is made about climate change policies and about energy sources has a direct impact on those who will live in coming decades and centuries. Whether we admit it or not, whether we like it or not, they are our neighbors.

In church-based discussions about global warming, I often hear people discussing a question grounded in charity: what kind of world do we want to leave for our children and grandchildren?

I have taken to rephrasing the question, and turning it around. What kind of a world do our children and grandchildren have a right to expect from us? That is a question of justice, and of rights. That is the approach that calls us most fully into our neighborly responsibility. From that perspective, to act as a neighbor means a commitment to conservation, to sustainability, to meeting the needs of future generations.

All creation.

Some of you may have noticed the missing piece in what I'm saying. I've pointed out the relationships that exist with all people around the world, now and into the future. The reality of those relationships demands that we be neighborly, that we seek justice and compassion.

But it is not only with people that we live in relationship. The great new insight of ecological studies is that we are all part of the web of life. No one, no thing, stands outside of it or separate from it. We are all part of one whole, one creation, and the same ecological rules apply to us all.

The most challenging stretch of "neighbor" is to see the whole web of life as morally significant.

We need to see the fish and the forests as full and active members of the earth community. They are not just resources, things that can be used or abused or exploited for our convenience. Those other parts of the creation cannot be placed outside of our circles of moral concern.

Now, that's a really hard notion for some people to grasp. Our culture has been built upon a mindset that is all too willing to think of the natural world only as things. Those things have monetary value, but not moral worth.

I hope we're learning a better and deeper truth. We are all part of the interconnected web of life. Seeing neighbors within the whole creation is a morally good thing, and it is practical matter of enlightened self interest. If the bee colonies collapse, so does much of our food supply. If habitat destruction and global warming lead to species extinctions and ecological instability, we are all caught up in the crisis.

Who acts a neighbor? I see neighborly action in dramatic steps to limit global warming, in the preservation of fragile and unique habitats, in the humane treatment of farm animals, and in the careful stewardship of fresh water.

CONCLUSION:

"Who is my neighbor?" The person who asked that question tried to draw boundaries, and Jesus refused to answer it. He called for neighborly action that breaks down the boundaries.

The call to act as a good neighbor recognizes that we live in far-reaching community and that we have obligations to others. The call to act as a neighbor leads us to evaluate the quality of all of our relationships, to make sure that we are embodying justice and compassion at all times.

In today's globalized, rapidly changing world, we must be explicit about that quality of neighborliness. We must challenge ourselves and our society so that no person, no creature, is seen as unworthy of moral concern.

Our neighborhood – and our obligation to just and neighborly action – reaches out to include all people of Earth, those of future generations, and the whole Earth community.

May we find the joy that comes from living well with all of our neighbors.