

And who is my neighbor?

Who is my neighbor? When I was nine years old, my family moved to Sewanee, Tennessee, where my father went to work at the School of Theology of the University of the South. I became a student in the 5th grade class at the Sewanee Public School. SPS was the only elementary school for the town of Sewanee, for the children of University faculty and seminarians, and for the surrounding communities - most of which were small pockets of extended families living here and there in the woods and coves on the mountain.

It was the first public school I had attended - the others were Episcopal schools in Mississippi and Louisiana. It was also the first time that I was in a class with African American children. They came to school in tattered, old clothes - ill-fitting shoes and uncombed hair. I learned that they lived in terribly poor, run-down houses in a little area off a dirt road behind the hardware store and the American Legion hall at the edge of town. These are my neighbors.

Who is my neighbor? It was the middle '60s. Even as a nine-year-old, I was aware of the differences between us, and also aware that some people didn't like those children simply because of their color. Sewanee happened to be the place where, I guess because of our age, my classmates and I started to learn how to tell jokes; my friends told jokes they had learned from their older brothers and sisters. I suppose they learned them from their classmates, who had learned them from other siblings. They were generally not nice jokes. We heard and retold cruelty jokes - jokes about people who were Polish...or retarded... Helen Keller jokes, of all things... and jokes where Negroes were called a name that my parents told me was not a word that anybody should use. I knew some people who used that word when they weren't telling jokes. These are my neighbors.

Who is my neighbor? When my family moved to Nashville two years later, we lived on a street where all the houses had the same floor plan. Every other house was oriented the same way, and the houses in between were the opposite - as if the floor plan had been flipped over when the house was built. It was 1965. All the people on our street were white. Everyone in the public school I went to was white. There was no desegregation in Nashville yet. A couple of years later, when my father decided we should move to a bigger house, he tried to sell it himself. After he showed the house to a Black man and his wife, people in the neighborhood called Daddy on the phone and threatened him. These are my neighbors.

Who is my neighbor? Here in Mobile, when former All Saints Rector, Mr. Wakefield, fought with the City about desegregating the buses, many parishioners left and went to other churches. These are my neighbors.

Who is my neighbor? The General Convention of the Episcopal Church that was held in 1970 'approved' for the first time the election of women as lay delegates to General Convention, and had also authorized the ordination of women to the diaconate. In 1974, 11 women had been 'irregularly' ordained in Philadelphia, which sent the church into a tailspin; the convention of '76 approved the ordination of women as deacons, priests and bishops. When I went to Sewanee after college to attend the School of Theology, it was also 1976.

It was a surprise to me that some people in the church were FURIOUS - and hostile - about the convention's resolution. Upon being introduced to a man I had never met, he called me an apostate and a sinner and then turned his back on me. One of the women who had been ordained very early after that convention was hired to be a chaplain for the University. In the parish where she had worked before coming to Sewanee, a man to whom she was trying to give communion bit her hand. The then-President Bishop, who was also the Chancellor of the University at the time, said women were no more qualified to be ordained than a teddy bear was qualified to be baptized. These are my neighbors.

Who is my neighbor? Only a few years after that, the Episcopal Church continued its discussion about who is a child of God, who is welcome at the Table, who can be called by God to the ordained ministry, and to whom is the blessing of a committed relationship available and permitted. Disagreements between varying church factions got louder. People left the Church. When Gene Robinson was ordained and consecrated as the Bishop of New Hampshire, he wore a bullet-proof vest under his vestments because of the death threats he had received. These are my neighbors.

Who is my neighbor? Here in Mobile, former All Saints rector, Buck Belmore, opened the doors of the church in a much more public way of welcoming those who were previously on the margins, and many people left and went to other churches. These are my neighbors.

Who is my neighbor? The attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon in 2001 provided us with a new group to fear and to hate. Easily stereotyped and supposedly easy to identify, this ethnic group has been fodder for the revival of old jokes, with the only change being the object of the jokes.

Jerry Falwell declared that the collapse of the Twin Towers on Sept. 11 was to be blamed, in part, on pagans, abortionists, feminists, gays, lesbians, and the ACLU. He had similar things to say about the city of New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina. He even called Billy Graham the chief servant of Satan.

But Mr. Falwell, may he rest in peace, pales in comparison to the Westboro Baptist Church and its pastor, Fred Phelps, of Topeka, Kansas. Mr. Phelps' ministry - if you can call it that - is one of extreme hatred. He and his congregation are famous for their protests at public events and funerals, with signs like 'God hates fags'...'God hates America'...and 'Thank God for dead soldiers.' They protest not only at the funerals of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, but have protested the funerals of Coretta Scott King, Mr. Rogers - that's right, as in "it's a beautiful day in the neighborhood" - and, yes, Jerry Falwell. These are my neighbors.

And now our nation is faced with the 'issue' of immigration and borders and who is welcome here and who is not - not a new issue, but one that is being played on a much larger field than in the past. It's another group of people who look different and sound different and do things differently from many of us. Many of us are afraid...many of us want others to be afraid so they will join us...and our fear is often manifested as anger and hate. These are my neighbors.

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So why am I talking about all these neighbors? Because the Samaritans and Jews feared and hated each other. And because, even though there aren't any Samaritans any more, there are still individuals and communities which we see as different, and which evoke our fear and derision.

Who does Jesus say is our neighbor? We would expect Jesus to say that EVERYONE is our neighbor. And as Jesus told the story of the man who had been beaten by robbers and left in the ditch, his audience expected him to say, "There was a priest, a Levite, and an Israelite walking down the road." But when he said, "a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan" instead, the tables were turned. This guy was the LAST person they expected to be named as their neighbor.

Listeners knew then and know now that our neighbor is the one who is different, the one we don't get along with, maybe the one who has done us wrong. We've heard it plenty of times and it is not a surprise.

But imagine, if you will, that you are the one lying in the ditch. You are the one who has been beaten within an inch of your life. You are vaguely aware that someone is

next to you. You squeeze open the one eye that still works to get a look at who it is above you, and it is...OMG...an African American...a redneck bubba...a stiff-necked bishop...a bra-burning feminist...a drag queen...a man with a long beard and a piece of cloth wrapped around his head...a former rector...a brown person with a Spanish accent...a...well...you fill in the blank with the neighbor you are most afraid of.

This person - this Samaritan - has asked himself the right question on the side of the road: instead of asking 'what will happen to me if I stop and help this man', he asked, 'what will happen to this man if *I* do *not* stop and help *him*?' And he stops to offer help.

Now, everything is up to you. Now, instead of choosing whether or not you are willing be a neighbor to an 'other,' you are receiving life-saving compassion from an 'other'. Can you accept this gift of mercy from someone you despise? If you do, it will change your life.

Jesus gave the lawyer and us not so much a set of beliefs as a way of life. One of the important parts of that way of life is shown through our compassion for those who are suffering, either individually or in communities. "Go and do likewise," he tells us. We don't have to come up with all the strength for this task, because it comes from God. We begin the task and we stay with it because we are a people of persistent hope. It may seem overwhelming at times. But we aren't expected to finish the task - just to never put it aside.

Let us go and do likewise. AMEN.