

# ARE WE NEIGHBORS?

Pentecost 7C – July 11, 2010

Amos 7:7-17 † Psalm 82 † Colossians 1:1-14 † Luke 10:25-37

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Luke has been setting us up for the past several weeks. We have heard of Jesus being moved to compassion when he came upon a funeral cortège and brought a grieving widow's son back to life.

We listened and watched as Jesus refused to destroy a Samaritan village with fire from heaven, and on the same Sunday we heard St. Paul admonish his readers to love their neighbors as they loved themselves.

We've begun to make our journey with Jesus towards Jerusalem. A journey that is best made in community with others. A journey upon which we will discover an abundance of opportunity for ministry. A journey that must always begin and continue in peace. A journey that will bring us near to the kingdom of God.

And today we find ourselves invited once again to watch and to listen as another journey takes place.

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This journey is one made on a rough and dangerous road to Jericho. This story of this journey includes a cast of characters as diverse as a priest, a Levite, an innkeeper, a victim, and one of those most reviled and hated of characters of that era – a Samaritan.

Our story today is set within the context of a conversation between Jesus and an

individual identified as 'a lawyer' in our text. This is one of those instances where we lose something in the translation. A more precise translation would be 'a teacher of the law of Moses – of the Torah – stood up to test Jesus.' This casts the conversation in an entirely different light. We are not listening to conversation between Jesus and a family-law attorney, or a defense attorney, a public defender or a District Attorney. Luke provides us with a teacher of the Torah asking Jesus a theological question: just who it is that we are supposed to love?

Who is it that is supposed to be greeted with peace?

With whom shall we experience the kingdom of God?

And Jesus responds with a very short story about a man on a journey.

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A man about whom we really know nothing. Is he a righteous individual – or a ne'er-do-well? Jew or Gentile? Pharisee or Sadducee? Wealthy or poor? We aren't given any hints. When we meet him, he is lying in a ditch, beaten, robed, left naked, and left to die.

We know a good bit more about the people who also have reason to be on this particular road. Both a priest – presumably

of the Temple in Jerusalem, and a Levite come across the man. We know that both the priest and the Levite saw the man in the ditch, and moved to the other side of the road to pass him by.

And then along comes the fellow for whom Luke has been setting the stage for a couple of chapters. Of all people, a Samaritan. For first century Jewish audience, there could not have been a more shocking protagonist.

Imagine a story set in the American Deep South – told to an audience of black sharecroppers in the middle of the last century – where the hero is a member of the KKK. Imagine a short story set in Germany or Poland in 1943, told to a Jewish audience in a ghetto – where the hero is a Nazi SS officer.

I suspect that many of the people who first heard this story from Luke simply stopped listening upon the introduction of the Samaritan figure. It would have been simply outrageous.

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As is so often the case with Jesus he ends his story with a question. Ask Jesus a question, and he will answer with a question for you.

As the story unfolds, we can easily go down the path of assuming that the point of the story is that the man in the ditch is our neighbor, and we should love him, as we love God and ourselves.

But instead, Luke throws us one of this great reversals. As Luke develops the story, Jesus isn't interested in us seeing the man in

the ditch as our neighbor. Instead, as Jesus finishes his short story, he rounds on the lawyer and throws him a curve ball. "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

Jesus did not buy into the world view of the lawyer – who was interested in the question 'who is my neighbor.' For Jesus, any time spent in trying to figure that out is wasted energy.

What is far, far, far more important – seeing to it that *we ourselves* act as neighbor to everyone that you meet. What matters, is that *we* enter into every relationship with 'the other' as *our neighbor*.

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"Who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked.

In the end Jesus says, 'Don't get distracted about that: are *you* a neighbor?'

The desire of Jesus is that we become bearers of love everywhere we go. If we strive to walk humbly, do justice, and love mercy; if our desire is that hearts be full of grace, mercy, compassion, and love – for both God and everyone else - then we won't ask, "Who is my neighbor" because it won't matter. The question becomes irrelevant when we ourselves are already *being* a neighbor.