

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This gospel parable is so familiar, it is dangerous. Really. Had you known in advance that the Good Samaritan would be the homily today, you might have considered staying home. After all, you have heard this preached ad nauseam, so now it is a form of casual sport in wondering how this preacher is going to struggle with doing something new out of it.

Well, let's see what God gives us.

You know this...as told to a Jewish hearer, a devout follower of the Torah. A man on the road gets beat up and robbed. The priest passes by, as does the Levite...both very proper men, the established spiritual leader and elder. The Samaritan...despised, unclean, rejected by the Jews...stops and takes care of the wounded man...and does more. Does far more. Even to the point of pledging the debt to the innkeeper until his return. Jesus says the Samaritan was a neighbor by showing mercy to the needy one.

That's it, right? Straight forward...or is it?

In preparation, I often look at other study references and other sermons...and almost all of them focus on the parable's definition of "neighbor" and how that should apply today. One says that we are all "tribal" by instinct and habit in that we are most comfortable with, and usually care most about, those like us. But, of course, we now live side-by-side with people of many different tribes...defining the word "tribe" very loosely.

In asking "who is my neighbor", another religious commentator asks where do my gifts, vocation, and advocacy create opportunities to bless the lives of others with the steadfast loving kindness of the gospel of the kingdom of God? Still, another asks, "How good a neighbor are you? Leading into two more sub-questions: First, for what stranger do you immediately drop everything to offer aid? And second, can you see that people you look down on...being the Samaritans...are better at this than the people you admire?

Another urges us: Do not worry about who your neighbor may be. Worry instead about whether you are acting as a neighbor; especially when the likelihood, the strain, even the scandal of being one pushes us far beyond what seems desirable or imaginable.

There are even a couple written by clergy who look boldly in the mirror and question what they see. One writes theological reflections on how hard the law is, or how far from our capacity and how hopeless it is to try to change the system, which all functions as a parlor game to keep us occupied as a church while we actually avoid doing anything for anyone. Finally, this from a pastor of long experience, thinking of how he was the priest passing by on the road: "Reflecting on over thirty years of ministry, I recognize that everytime I have kept the rules of the church with regard to who may or may not be baptized, confirmed, married or buried in the Church, inevitably, someone has gotten hurt or excluded. Usually both. During such times I have felt such a coward having hidden in the thicket of the law."

See what I mean? There are oodles of similar variations found online. All this, around the concept of “neighbor”. So, what do I do with this. How does God give me something new here?

Well....

With all due respect, I think that everyone’s focus places the cart before the horse. In other words, the emphasis on study, and exegesis, and homiletics, may...and I say MAY...be over emphasized.

Look at the gospel passage in its entirety again. It is always the lawyers! Good for a laugh, sure, and I can get away with a laugh at myself. But while lawyers are everywhere today like micro bacteria, feeding off of man-made and inspired law, then it was different...the very purpose and focus of the lawyer then was working to understand and interpret God’s law. This lawyer asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

OK, as an aside, can we all agree that there is life and death, and also biblical life and death? We all have loved ones who are dead in body. But as people of the hope of the Resurrection, we believe...or should believe...by faith, that we are not....NOT....like the plants that grow from seed, flower, wither and then die to become compost for the next life cycle. But rather we are each on a life journey that just moves on, out of our sight and onto the next stage of eternal peace and unity with God. That what makes you, and you, and you, different from me, and everyone else on the planet, is what makes you particularly special and loved by God...the part made in the very image of God. The lawyer in this parable, thank God, understands that we, as the children of God, are entitled to receive our inheritance of eternal life...so, he asks the question outright, as a good lawyer, “what do I have to do?”

Verses 27 and 28 are the key to today’s lesson. Jesus replies with a question back, saying to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "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." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

So, that is it. Do this, and you will live. That is simple and straight-forward. End of sermon? Well, not quite.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself. It seems to me that if, if, if, we love the Lord our God with all we have and are, it is automatic to love our neighbor as ourselves. It would be a natural. If we are able to obey the command to love God totally in the way that Jesus did, we would not be able to resist, to stop going out and helping any one, anywhere, who needed our help.

Lord knows the need is there, and it is here. From an objective view, this community does not need emergency aid....we are not flooded, there is no earthquake damage here. But peel back the onion surface....if we really want to, and that is a very big “IF”....what do we see? Various levels of addiction to various substances, some more insidious than others. Different views and varieties of lower case situations that, taken with others, add up to a cycle of poverty...situations like under- or unemployment, inadequate affordable housing, mental illnesses, chronic debt. Or even more specialized, like the needs of single, teenaged mothers, with or without substance abuse issues, who are alone, helpless, unmentored, struggling, panicking.

I am relatively able bodied. I have extra bedrooms at home in a too big house. There is more that I can do, but I cannot seem to get my arms around the hugeness of the problem in a way that I could personally assist in. I would wager there are some here today who feel the same way: I want to help, but don't know how I can given my own health, age, infirmities, schedule, and so on.

The bottom line to all this is that the entire body of analysis about who our neighbor is, and what we should do about it, follows the truth that we have already given our hearts over to God. That we already meet the commandment of Jesus to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and soul, and strength, and mind.

Failing to do that is the great sin. That is the place where we find ourselves that we have to pray, every Sunday, in the Lord's prayer and elsewhere, to forgive us our sins or trespasses. I used to wonder why, if God forgives our sins, why we have to pray for that same relief over and over...and now it is clear that, at the very least, asking constantly for forgiveness is the way that we continue to allow God to realign our lives back onto the journey God would have for us. Kind of like the way we constantly, and subconsciously, ever-so-gently move the steering wheel in the car while we drive on the interstate. We call it Resurrection.

We know in our hearts that we are called to help others whose need is evident before us, as did the Samaritan. But we also know in our hearts that we are, in and of ourselves, powerless to give ourselves completely to be able to love the Lord our God in the same way that Jesus did. We cannot come to love God that way on our own...the great lesson from Chapters 5 and 6 in the Gospel of John. We cannot, absolutely cannot, act on our own to reduce and eliminate the violence, the racism, the oppression that is endemic in our culture, on our streets and in the world. We cannot do it on our own. Not will not. Cannot.

So, pray unceasingly..constantly...that we will know this Resurrection today and not just when our bodies stop breathing. That God will give each one of us the natural willingness and openness to begin and continue a journey of life that loves the Lord our God with all that we are and all that we have, so that we may inherit that eternal life with God. And, in the partnership with God that was intended for us when we were first created, to witness and see the coming of the kingdom that we pray for.

Hope in resurrection for eternal peace and joy with our loving God, self revealed through our neighbors as the Father, and as the Son, and as the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

