

GOOD NEIGHBORS

During his sermon, a pastor quoted Jesus, "Love your neighbor as yourself." To emphasize the point, he asked three times, with increasing intensity: "Who is my neighbor? Who is my neighbor? Who is my neighbor?!" Each time he asked this, a young boy in the congregation answered quietly: "Mister Rogers! Mister Rogers! Mister Rogers!"

Fred Rogers of children's television fame was a good neighbor. But the lawyer's question to Jesus is just as relevant today as it was 2,000 years ago. Who is our neighbor?

Newspaper columnist David Hunter writes for the Knoxville, Tennessee News-Sentinel. Hunter recalls a person from his childhood who was popularly known as the Good Samaritan. She was an elderly woman who spent each day on a street corner in downtown Knoxville, collecting money from passersby. She impressed many people with her neat uniform and simple appeal: "Would you like to help the Good Samaritan?" Who could say no? Only years later did Hunter learn that there was no Good Samaritan charity, that in fact the elderly lady in the impeccable uniform was pocketing the money for herself.

There it is—the fear that many people have—that if they try to be The Good Samaritan and help someone else, they will be taken advantage of. And so, as we come to the text for today, some of you are already skeptical. Even though this is one of Jesus' best-known stories—and one of his most important stories—there is a built-in resistance to its lesson.

A lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" That's an interesting beginning to the story. A lawyer looking for a loophole—just as some of us look for loopholes in Jesus' teachings. Jesus said to the lawyer, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" And the lawyer 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." This lawyer was no dummy. He was obviously a devout and intelligent man. Jesus said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, the lawyer presses Jesus further, "And who is my neighbor?" Then Jesus tells one of the best-known stories in all of literature: the story of the Good Samaritan. After telling his story Jesus turned the question back on the lawyer: "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" the lawyer couldn't wiggle out of this one. He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

That's powerful and also disturbing. I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but have you ever passed by someone who was in trouble—and thought of this old, old story that our Lord told? We've all done it, haven't we? For a host of good reasons. At least they sounded good at the time. I'm no hypocrite. I've given the same reasons myself: "They'll just spend it on alcohol, it might be dangerous to stop, or I've got hospital calls to make." But back in the deep recesses of our brains, this story remains. And it troubles us.

In the winter of 1990, Michael Peterson was asked to appear on a television talk show in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. At the end of the first day of taping he was on his way back to his plush, high-rise hotel, when he saw something he'd never seen before. Lying on the sidewalk against a building in four inches of snow was a man sleeping with only a cardboard blanket to keep him from being completely exposed to the freezing cold. What really broke Peterson's heart was when he realized that the man wore no shoes or socks. He thought he should stop and help the man but he wasn't quite sure what to do. As the traffic light turned green, it seemed life was demanding that he move along. So, that's what he did. Back in his luxurious hotel, he promptly forgot about the man on the street.

Several days later, prior to the morning taping, he was having coffee and Danish in the green room at the station. All of the "important" people had left the room and only he and the janitor were left. Peterson had seen the janitor go quietly about his business every day while he was there. The man never said a word except "Good morning" or "Can I get anything for you sir?" He always had a smile to give to everyone.

When Peterson asked the janitor how he was feeling today, the humble man told him that he'd been having to ride his bike to work in the snow and that he'd been feeling rather sorry for himself... that is, until he saw a man sleeping down on the corner of Young and Bloor with only a piece of cardboard for covering and no shoes. Michael Peterson says he almost choked on his Danish as he heard this simple janitor go on to relate how he was so moved with compassion for this homeless man that he went around the corner to a store and bought the man a pair of socks and shoes.

Peterson said he stood there wishing it was he who had bought the shoes and socks for the man. Later, when he got to the studio, they were concluding an interview with a social worker who specialized in benevolence for eastern Ontario. The social worker relayed a story about Mother Teresa, who when asked once how she had accomplished such great things in her life responded, "None of us can do anything great on our own, but we can all do a small thing with great love."

We've all been there, haven't we? Michael Peterson tells his story in one of the Chicken Soup for the Soul books, but we've all been there. And, unless we've hardened our hearts so completely that no semblance of compassion remains, we all confess that there have been times we've acted more like the priest and the Levite than we've acted like the Good Samaritan.

The heart of authentic faith is love. That's the first thing we need to see. When Jesus asked the lawyer what is written in the law, the lawyer 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." That is the very center of our faith. It was the very center of Jewish faith. The great commandment was not something new that Jesus was seeking to introduce into Jewish faith and practice. It was there already. The problem is that it is easy to major in minors and to neglect what is fundamental. It was no accident that Jesus chose a priest and a Levite to make his point. It was not to make the Jewish faith look bad. Why in the world would he do that?

Jesus lived and died a Jew. The priest and the Levite could have been officers in any religious movement. Notice that the priest and the Levite, like the Samaritan, were going down from Jerusalem. Surely they had visited the temple there. They were inspired. They felt good about themselves. They had fulfilled their religious duties. And suddenly the hollowness of their religious commitment is exposed. They had fulfilled the first half of these commandments. They had loved God.

But passing down the road they came upon this dread scene: by the side of the road lay a fellow Jew, badly beaten and nearly dead. If a Samaritan had been the victim of the robbers, they might have been justified in their negligence, since most Jews did not regard Samaritans as neighbors. Their only responsibility under some interpretations of the law was to love other Jews—just as some Christians only feel responsible for other Christians.

But this man lying beside the road was their neighbor. And they knew it, but still they passed on by. These two religious men may have been real stars in the temple or the synagogue, they might have read the torah with eloquence and conviction, but they were miserable failures with regard to the second commandment. Paul tells us in 1st Corinthians 13, "Though I speak with the tongue of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a slashing cymbal." Love is at the heart of faith.

It is particularly at the heart of Christian faith. It would be absurd to think that only Christians know how to love. Some of the most loving people in this world are Jews or Hindus, or Buddhists, or even followers of Mohammad. There are many loving people who do not follow Jesus. Love is at

the center of faith for many people in the world. But it is uniquely so for Christians. Why? I don't know of any other god in any other religion who has scars on his hands, do you? Scars from having hung on a cross. Why did Christ go to the cross? Because of love. Were we deserving of that love? No, quite the opposite. It was because we were helpless. We were lying beside the road, beaten, and bloody and about to breathe our last breath and God saw us lying there and had mercy on us. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." How much does God love us? This much. No other God has scars on his hands from stopping to help a stranger beside the road. Love is the heart of faith—particularly for the followers of Jesus.

And that brings us to the final thing to be said: Jesus' love is the hope of the world. It's amazing. We still live in a world of ancient hatreds. It is a world in which might continues to make right. It is still a world where the mantra is still an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Can we not see that this is a formula for disaster? Only when we truly love God and truly love our neighbor can there be any hope for the world. The love of Jesus is the hope of the world. And that love needs to be the hope of each person in this world. Let me tell you about a man named Bobby.

Bobby's mother was 15 when she gave birth to him. She hung out in the local bars every night, leaving her children to fend for themselves. Since Bobby was the oldest, he took care of his brothers and sisters. The men their mother brought home from the bars often beat the children. When the child welfare authorities found the children, they were living in filth, surviving off ketchup sandwiches. The children were separated into different foster homes. Bobby's first foster parents were violent drunks. His second mother treated him like a dog. Bobby's only prayer was to find a family who loved him.

When Bobby was 12, an older couple named Arnold and Mary Petterson wanted to adopt him. The authorities tried to discourage them. But the moment that Arnold and Mary met Bobby, they were determined to make him part of their family. Mary wrapped her arms around Bobby and spoke those words he had waited 12 long years to hear: "Bobby, I love you."

Years later in college, when Bobby heard the campus pastor say that God has chosen us to be a part of his family, he knew how special that offer is. So he gave his life to Christ. Today, Dr. Robert Petterson is a pastor, college professor, and an author. Friends, there is no other way by which people are saved, other than by the love of Jesus. So, who is my neighbor? Anyone who needs my love—anyone who needs the love of Jesus.