

PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY SERVICE

January 25, 2024 at The Star of the North

Message by Clinton Porritt

Luke 10:25-37

A lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher", he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said 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 neighbour as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live".

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend'. Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy". Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise".

New Revised Standard Version

Have you met Jesus through the lives of others? I've been thinking about some friends my Mom mentioned who keep giving their shoes away to the homeless. Or the non-religious guy in Edmonton who brings BBQ over to the new "homeless neighbours", introducing himself just like he would for any other new neighbour.

When we meet Jesus—that is, the love of Christ compelling us beyond "reason" to compassion—it is firstly an encounter of shock. Love beyond reason, sacrificial love, hits us simultaneously in the head and heart with disbelief, awe, confusion, conviction and even longing. Stories such as our gospel reading today *should* stir such things in us. To feel the magnetic-like pull of a greater Love. "I am not there yet, but I feel drawn, compelled to move toward this."

The lawyer, a teacher of the Mosaic Law, comes to Jesus with the intention of testing him. This is perhaps the most common style of learning in the Rabbinic tradition, even a form of public entertainment. To set forward a question regarding the Torah for discussion and debate between rabbis. A question followed by a back and forth; a sparring of words and views. A testing of the depth of thought and knowledge.

It all starts with what we call a rhetorical question: a seemingly simple question poised in such a way as to catch their opponent off guard. The point of the rhetorical question is to get you asking yourself: “I know, that you know, that I know the answer to this. So what are you *really* asking?” Part of this rhetorical game involves figuring out the question behind the question before your opponent springs an “Aha!” on you.

The lawyer asks the simplest of questions drawn from the daily Jewish prayer: “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” In response, Jesus cleverly turns the question back on his would-be debater. “What’s your take on that question? What does the Law say?”

He answered, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all that you are... and love your neighbour as yourself.*” And Jesus said to him, “*You have given the right answer—Love of God and love of neighbour is central to our faith—do this, and you will live.*”

A rhetorical question often serves to make a point rather than get to an answer. And perhaps embedded here is a truth relevant to Christian unity and inter-Christian dialogue. **In our conversations with and about one another, how easy it is to let a strain of spiritual one-upmanship overshadow our listening, our openness, our love.**

The lawyer, testing, wanting to *prove* himself asks Jesus: “*And who is my neighbour?*”

You may have noticed how Jesus’ rarely directly answered a question. Why is that?

In the gospels we find religious leaders often asked Jesus questions in order to trap him, to frame him in and box him up. I used to ask my college students: Are you asking an honest question? Is this a safe question for me to try to answer or are you trying to somehow box me in? Are you seeking understanding or are you seeking to prove your point? Sometimes I worry about the type of questions we ask each other.

But I think there’s another reason why Jesus often didn’t directly answer a question posed to him. And that reason is this: Jesus had an uncanny sense—a divine sense—of knowing when people were **asking the wrong question**.

A teacher of the Law... analytical/technical/critical. A great posture for the classroom or courtroom, a poor posture for followers of Jesus Christ.

“*Who is my neighbour?*” is a question with the undertones of a teenager doing chores or writing an assignment: A parent asks: “Please clean up the dishes”... “Even the dishes that aren’t mine?” A teacher asks: “Write a paragraph on what inspired you in this book.” “How long of a paragraph?”

“*Who is my neighbour?*” is a question that echos Peter’s question: “How often do I need to forgive? Is seven times enough?”

Similar to Jesus' answer of 77 times, I remember learning from an Imam that the answer to "*Who is my neighbour?*" in Islam is: 40 houses to the north, 40 houses to the east, 40 houses to the south, and 40 houses to the west.

"*Who is my neighbour?*" is too small of a question. It's a question that should strike us as somehow off the mark.

In being a neighbour, we're not looking to rack up some neighbour points so as to meet some base moral threshold. We're not asking: Who do I *have to* love? What are the minimum requirements for being a good neighbour, a good citizen, a good partner, a good parent, a good Christian?

It's what one might call a scarcity mindset: what's the smallest circle I can draw around my interactions, my community, my compassion? It's a mindset that keeps us entering into, experiencing, and transmitting the limitless love of God for this world.

**Jesus parable is not primarily about what we do or how we do it.
It's about who we are!**

When our religious duties, our religious structures and forms, begin to busy us and prevent us from recognizing our neighbours fallen down on our very doorsteps, we've lost the plot. To be a neighbour, to love beyond boundaries, is far more than an item on a check list. It's at the heart of our Christian identity. It's who we are.

In the parable of the good neighbour, it isn't the distinguished religious folk who are moved with pity at the site of the man beaten unconscious on the side of the road. It is the Samaritan. The cultural-outsider. The enemy. The one who doesn't quite fit into neat religious boxes.

Jesus story takes the lawyers question "*Who is my neighbour?*" and broadens it to a quite different question: "Who was a neighbour? Are you like the one who showed mercy?" The question is not "Who is the person-out-there that qualifies as someone I should be loving toward", but "Who am I in relation to anyone, to anything I meet? Do my words/actions qualify me as a loving neighbour?"

To borrow a phrase from the quintessential neighbour, the late Mr. Fred Rogers: God helping us, we can make our lives "a neighbourhood expression of care."¹

The back-and-forth doesn't go the way the lawyer had envisioned. At the end of this story, Jesus has a chance to ask his own rhetorical question: *Which of these three—the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan—do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?*

¹ David Dark, *We Become What We Normalize*, 46.

It seems the lawyer can't bring himself to say the word "Samaritan". In making the Samaritan the hero of the story, the story gets too uncomfortable. The Samaritan's humility, his healing touch, his radical hospitality cut close to the heart. He can't bring himself to acknowledge the tension: "*Who was a neighbour?*" Jesus asks. He answers: "*The one who showed him mercy*".

Will they know we are Christians by our love? The challenge for the beloved community as writer David Dark puts it, is to "conjure a sacred space of responsiveness in a sea of reactivity."² Responsive not reactive.

We know it's possible to become so busy trying to be the heroes of our own stories, that we breeze right past one another on the road. We can miss out on binding the wounds of Christ, our neighbour. We can miss out on seeing Christ in actions of an outsider. We can forget there's strength in numbers; that we've been called to walk together. Jesus' challenge for us is to come near, to see, to be moved with compassion.

"Go and do likewise."

² Dark, 37.