

Who are Our Neighbors? Just Look Around...

(Luke 10:25-37)

Sermon delivered by Matt Rhodes at St. George's Episcopal Church, Arlington, Virginia

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 10, 2016

In the name of the God who creates, the Son who redeems, and the Holy Spirit that sustains.
Amen.

Who is my neighbor?

When this unnamed lawyer posed this question to Jesus, I don't think he had any idea what he was opening himself up for. And certainly the Gospel writer may not have known just how important this parable would become to generations of Christians around the world. On the surface, this question – like many others posed to and by Jesus during his ministry – seems like it would have a simple answer. But it doesn't. Our neighbors are ones we think of often – and in recent days, we have thought of our neighbors not out of a sense of curiosity, but out of a feeling of pain and loss.

Several years ago, our youngest daughter was upset when one of her neighborhood playmates moved to another part of town. As she was talking to me about it, she asked, "Will she still be our neighbor?" I said that they would – and she seemed relieved. Two years ago, she and her sister both felt the heartache of having a friend with whom they had grown up in the church move out of state. Our youngest again asked, "Are we still neighbors, even though they live in Alabama now?" I said that we were – and again, you could see the relief on her face.

For our children, being a neighbor is something related to **distance**. In their minds, the greater concern is about where you live – whether it's two blocks up the street or 12 hours down the interstate. Often, that's true for a lot of people. We often think of neighbors as those we see regularly – at the community picnic or out mowing their lawns on Saturday morning or walking down the sidewalk with the kids on a cool evening. It's a comforting thing, really – walking out the front door in the morning and seeing some folks headed to work and others headed to the bus stop. Those can be moments of stability, of reassurance.

But being a neighbor is also about relationship – **who** we are to one another rather than **where** we are in relation to one another. More importantly, it's about **how** we are to one another, and that was ultimately the point of the parable shared by Jesus in today's Gospel reading. The neighbor – in this case, a Samaritan, part of a group that often found itself cast to the margins in the Israel of Jesus' day – was the one who saw someone in need and stopped to care for him. It didn't matter that they were from different segments of society. In his response, we see that the Samaritan didn't see himself as a Samaritan, but as a human being – and in this moment on this lonely wilderness road, he didn't see the man lying wounded as a Jewish traveler in need of help, but as a fellow human in trouble.

What's truly remarkable is that the Samaritan didn't just offer immediate help; he provided ongoing care. He demonstrated a love that wasn't offered just out of a sense of obligation; it was a love that was extravagant. He binds his wounds and pours oil and wine on them. He gives up his seat so that

the injured man will not have to walk. He takes him to an inn and pays in advance for his care. He even announces he will pass back through and pay for any care above and beyond the money he has already provided.

Jesus often tells stories and shares lessons of what it means to give extravagantly from our love. Does someone sue for your shirt? Give them your cloak, too. Love your enemies. Learn from the vineyard owner who paid the last hired as much as the first. Watch the joyful giving of the father who throws an elaborate banquet and gives all he has to a son who had abandoned his home, his family and his heritage. In each of these instances, just as we see in today's Gospel, people act as they do towards others – towards their neighbors – not because they have to, but because they *want* to.

Over the past few weeks, these lessons of extravagant love have been lost in the echo of the senseless deaths that have taken place around the country. Orlando. Baton Rouge. Falcon Heights. Dallas. A list of communities growing longer, seemingly by the day, in which dreams of living as neighbors have been shattered by the reality of gunfire. Some of the tragedies, like Orlando, are of such a large scale that the names themselves are lost in an endless stream of the photos of the dead. Others, such as those we've witnessed this week, result in our learning the names of those taken.

Philando Castile. Alton Sterling. Brent Thompson. Patrick Zamarripa. Michael Krol. Lorne Ahrens. Michael Smith.

Every one a life cut tragically short. Every one *a neighbor* – separated from us by distance, yes, but joined with us as part of God's creation.

A roll call of senseless loss – and from these losses, an ever-increasing sense of anxiety and tension. Rather than feeling like the Samaritan who offers help and healing, these days have left me feeling like the one who was beaten and abandoned on the side of the road. And for all of the emotion I have been feeling, it in no way comes close to the hurt, anger, grief and marginalization being felt and expressed by the families and friends of the young black men, police officers and perpetrators who lost their lives this week.

So in the midst of this tragedy, as witnesses to the racism, fear, hostility and division that still hold the country in its terrible grip, we are all undoubtedly trying to find something. Where, we ask, is the *good news*?

I want you to do something. Turn and look at the person next to you, or behind you. Don't say anything – just look.

There is the good news. The faces of the people next to us – our friends and family, our guests, our fellow St. Georgians – are the collective face of the good news we are seeking. Yours are the faces of those welcoming the stranger, comforting the poor, reaching out to the marginalized. It is your hands that throw open the doors of this place and extend an invitation to the world, and it is your desire to take the church beyond these four walls that offers a glimpse of humanity's best to those who have only experienced its worst.

One of my heroes, the civil rights leader and current congressman John Lewis, gave one of the most powerful statements I have ever heard. He said, "We must learn to live together as brothers and sisters. If not, we will perish as fools." The people of this city, this nation, this world are all brothers and

sisters. We may have different beliefs, different traditions, and different languages, and we may live with different goals and dreams. But at the end of the day, we are all part of the same creation.

Who are our neighbors? As a writer of a commentary on this passage wrote, "Love ... must know no limits of race and ask no enquiry. Who needs me is my neighbor. Whom at the given time and place I can help with my active love, they are my neighbor and I am theirs."

Amen.