

EIGHTH
SUNDAY
AFTER
PENTECOST

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Merciful One who meets us along the road, have compassion on us in our struggle to recognize one in need not as a stranger, but as a neighbor. Give us ears to hear your welcome, hearts that are open to your invitation, and minds that comprehend your goodness. Amen.

Jesus and a lawyer sit down at a pub for a drink and a conversation. You know that conversation is not going to go well for the lawyer. The lawyer asks what is necessary for eternal life. Jesus asks him what the law says. Jesus asks the lawyer, to explain the law. The lawyer actually gets the answer correct. Then the lawyer gets a little confident...so unlike lawyers, right? He tries test Jesus and asks, "and so, who is my neighbor."

Listen to Frederick Buechner's thoughts on this exchange:

(The lawyer) wanted a legal definition he could refer to in case the question of loving one ever happened to come up. He presumably wanted something on the order of: "A neighbor (hereinafter referred to as the party of the first part) is to be construed as meaning a person of Jewish descent whose legal residence is within a radius of no more than three statute miles from one's own legal residence unless there is another person of Jewish descent (hereinafter to be referred to as the party of the second part) living closer to the party of the first part than one is oneself, in which case the party of the second part is to be construed as neighbor to the party of the first part and one is oneself relieved of all responsibility of any sort or kind whatsoever."

Instead Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), the point of which seems to be that your neighbor is to be construed as meaning anybody who needs you. The lawyer's response is left unrecorded.¹

Frederick Buechner's quote highlights the absurdity of this particular text this week. Lawyers like to ask specific, clarifying questions. It's what they are trained to do because parsing out minute details can mean the difference between winning and losing a case for the client. Marketers, philosophers, artists, businessmen and women, teachers, therapists, and even clergy do the same thing with words and ideas. Oftentimes, this is a good thing. Clarity is important to have. 1 Originally published in *Wishful Thinking*

In my own experience though, I often latch on to words and definitions as a way to distract myself and others from what is really at the heart of an issue. Is anyone else guilty such things, or is it just me? Good thing God comes to us as a storyteller, as a trickster and flips the script on us, well I know I appreciate it (says the preacher tongue fully in cheek). Maybe you do too.

So as Jesus often likes to do, he flips a situation on its head in order bring the focus back to where it ought to be, which is on love as the way of God. In this text we see that sometimes, seeking clarity is a way of avoiding. And all of the of professions I mentioned earlier do that quite well. We use definitions, details, and other minutia to create a diversion so that we think the one in the ditch is not more important than the task or destination ahead, or even worse, that we are the one in the ditch in need of help.

I find it interesting that recently, the country has been buzzing about legal cases: Voting Rights Act, Defense of Marriage Act, Prop 8, and the Zimmerman case, etc. I made the mistake of trying to read through one of the decisions. There was so much jargon that I, a smart learned man, could not even begin to comprehend. I got so frustrated. All I wanted was to be able to understand what had happened and why some people were excited and still others of the same political bent were leery of the decision on that particular issue. That same day I called dear friend who was initially in school to be a lawyer, until seminary got in the way, and she tried to explain what had happened and what the implications were. My frustration was not eased and I exhaustedly complained, "This is why I hate legal stuff and politics!" Words upon words and suddenly the average citizen has no clue what is going on.

Side note: This is why we, as a country, as human beings often fall into our political lines, because it is easier to follow an ideology that will speak for us than to actually understand what is truly going on at the heart of an issue. The slight of hand, or word, is so prevalent in our culture, that is nearly impossible to truly think through an issue constructively on our own. Or maybe it's just me that struggles with this, in which case I'm sorry for projecting my own stuff on yall. Is this just me?

But is anyone else with me on this? You feel where I'm coming from?

This man asks Jesus a question that evades and avoids what Jesus is really all about. And so Jesus calls this lawyer's question to task with an illustration. A man is walking along a road and is robbed and beaten. Two men who the hearer assumes would be likely to care about this man, do not. A priest and a Levite. These are two orders of religious folk and Levites also served political roles. Moses and Aaron were Levites and the priestly order comes from the line of Aaron. Other notable Levites: Samuel, Ezekiel, Ezra, Malechi, and Miriam. Jesus' parables are like an Ingmar Bergman film, everything is symbolic. But the priest and Levite are too busy, too distracted by their duties and destinations to do anything. The one who the listener would not expect to do anything has deeply integrated the way of God in his life and is the one who cares for and helps the one robbed and beaten along the path. Sensing the lawyer is not really interested in who his neighbor is, but rather who his neighbor is not, Jesus illustrates how one truly lives out one's faith, which is by practice and presence.

But here is the interesting twist...The lawyer, who wanted to "test" Jesus and "justify himself" asks, "who is MY neighbor?" At the end of the story, Jesus asks the lawyer a question, "Who is the one who acted like a neighbor?" "Suddenly the neighbor isn't the one in need, but the one who provides for our need."

Jesus, shifting the question around a little does not leave the lawyer's own question unanswered. Clearly the one in the ditch is the lawyer's neighbor. Jesus wants to go further and ask, so what does it look like to be this individual's neighbor? When someone is in the ditch of life, especially when they are not of our own kind, actively or passively ignoring them is not the option if we are to follow in the way of Jesus. I know you have all heard about the relationship between Jews and Samaritans. Think Rachael Madow or John Stewart and say Bill O'Reilly.

In recent weeks we've heard from the apostle Paul that in Christ there is neither Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free for all are one in Christ. And we know Jesus's stance on enemies. So who is our neighbor? Anyone. But particularly the one for whom we seem to be at odds with and is hurting and in the ditch. I'm sure we all heard the stories of folk who took meals and spent time with Muslim families in the days after 9/11. It wasn't exactly safe for many Muslims to leave their homes, pray in their mosque's, or open their businesses. But their neighbors spent time with them, gave them food, drove them to churches and allowed them to pray. It was obvious to know who acted like a neighbors in those horrifying days.

Clearly, as impossible as it would have seemed to the lawyer, Jesus is asking him to be like a Samaritan, if in fact it is only the despised Samaritan who is the one who truly lived out God's law.

But what if we're the ones in the ditch? I think it is just so automatic to see ourselves in the place of the Samaritan, the one who bandages, gives medicine, offers to give a lift, and even pays for another's shelter and safety. What if we are not the privileged ones? What if we are in fact the ones in need of some help? Who would be the least likely person that you would want to help you? When you are in a spiritual ditch who is the one you least likely want to pray for you? When money is tight, who do you least want to offer you a helping hand? When you are emotionally distraught by the painful realities of this life, who is the dreaded Samaritan that might come along and offer the salve you need? And what do we do, in a culture that associates those of us in this room with the priest and the Levite in this story?

So the question might be who are you in this story? Maybe a better question is who are you NOT in this story. And ultimately, throughout this week, may you constantly be confronted with the question, of what it means to be a neighbor, whether you are the one in the ditch or the Samaritan.

Amen.