



July 10, 2022 – The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
The Reverend Brock Baker, Sabbatical Priest  
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

I am torn. I am torn between the private, daily, inner life and the public outer life of political and material matters that like tidal waves or hurricanes of forest fires or the gradual deterioration of our environment; the threats to our health and our neighbors' health, the consistent ongoing exploitation of the poorest among us, who in peace and in war, get it in the neck, lose the most, including health and life and hope.

As a minister I am torn between the analogous “sides” of our lives as individual members of the church of Jesus Christ, with souls to save and consciences to listen to, and the church as a single body with visions to fulfill.

Our readings for today express this conundrum:

And our Gospel gives us Jesus' perspective.

Amos is concerned with a whole society's ills both social and religious.

The newly rich exploit the newly poor and worship a God, or gods, of nationalism and supremacy in war.

Paul in Colossians is concerned with the spiritual maturity of a group of new Christians.

Will they continue to grow in the knowledge and love of God when adversity strikes?

Jesus is determined to expand the love of neighbor to cosmic proportions.

He makes a demand of us, as individuals, as the parish, as the body of the church to show mercy to those in need whoever they may be as the Good Samaritan did. And he leaves us to ponder our answer to an ongoing question, But How?

Our Collect lays out our challenge and our need: “so that we may know and understand what things we ought to do....[and] have grace and power..... to accomplish them. “

The Parable of the Good Samaritan.

What a great story it is. Along with the Prodigal Son it is the most well know parable in Scripture.

Analogous to the 23d Psalm this parable is known well outside the formal boundaries of professed Christians. To have heard it once is to remember it always. To me this fact argues for two things: First, the parable is of divine origin and therefore of limitless appeal and interest; and two, each person is created d with a God sized hole that only the divine Word of God can adequately fill.

The Samaritan as a model for all Christians is an observation that is often made. But who do the priest and the Levite represent? The priest is in charge of the temple in Jerusalem and the sacrificial system of worship it enshrines. He is of Aaron's family. The Levite is of the tribe of Levi, and assists the priest at the temple doing the less important tasks. Their passing by the man half dead on the side of the road without attempting to help is a condemnation of “official Judaism.” The primary audience, the lawyer who had posed the question to Jesus: Who is my neighbor, would be surprised by this judgment.



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When the Samaritan enters the scene, there is a reversal of the previous passersby indifference. “When he saw him he was moved with pity.” And he leaps into action. He does six “compassionate actions: “He (1) comes up to him and (2) binds his wounds. ...As he engages in the process of bandaging the wounds he (3) anoints the cuts with oil and wine. [he may have deprived himself of refreshment...] He (4) loads the man on his own mule—he probably walked from then on—(5) takes him to the inn; (6) he provides care and comfort to this man he has just met, and stays the night to care for him. He lays out money upfront and makes a contract that he will come back and pay for any extra costs. Two days wages....take care of room and board for 24 days. “As many compassionate acts do ...a concrete price was involved that the Samaritan was willing to pay” (pp. 1032-3, Bock, Luke).

Jesus asks the lawyer about which characters acted as a neighbor—not answering the question who was the lawyer’s neighbor as if it could be readily characterized; instead he asks him who had treated the injured man as if he were one, who had “become” a neighbor to his neighbor defined not by race, class, ethnicity but by need.

“One should not seek to narrowly define who is a neighbor so as to limit one’s responsibility. [The obligation is not to see what can be avoided, but to render aid when it can be readily supplied” (p 1034, Ibid).

Jesus defined the Samaritan’s action as “showing mercy” which is a definition of love, what the lawyer had rightly declared he must extend to God and his neighbor to “inherit eternal life.” Just as he had said to the lawyer after he had responded with the right answer, “do this and you will live.” He says to him now, Go and do likewise and the tense of the has same sense of continuous action, do it and keep doing; it defines you and makes you the kind of caring person Jesus wants him—and us—to be.

Jesus’s question shows what a neighbor is. Not who is a neighbor and who is not, but what does it mean to be a neighbor, which is to say, “to render aid where it is needed.” To live a life of showing mercy.

Modern Christians take in the parable’s lesson about who is your neighbor. I think we have a harder time figuring out what we should do about it, in terms of will and capacity. I just heard about a woman who has just adopted a baby choosing to foster a second child and I remarked to my wife I don’t think I would be able to be a neighbor to those two children; to render aid where it was needed, and feeling this to be true I felt ashamed or guilty or defensive. It is made clear the Samaritan is not only generous but has enough money to spend on the injured man’s care and recovery. But if like us we are faced with, say, ten worthy charities, or five cases where help is needed and our budget is tight. Becoming a neighbor to those in need is not so simple once you have gotten beyond limiting neighbors to those of your own race, sex, ethnicity, age, etc.

All of us have heard many sermons on this difficult question; or debated it among ourselves, how to choose whom to be a neighbor too and how much time and treasure to expend in rendering aid to them.



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I have read one answer: those within your circle of care. But how is that circle defined? Relatives, friends, fellow church members....

Here is another answer: “The issue is not who we may or may not serve, but serving where need exists. We are not to seek to limit who are neighbors might be. Rather we are to be a neighbor to those whose needs we can meet” p. 1035, Ibid).

This is also unsatisfactory. I will end with two points: Jesus always intends us to reach an end to our capacity to determine ethical behavior, i.e. to figure out what we need to do to be in a good place in relation to God and our conscience.

Remember Paul’s cry of frustration in Romans 7:21 “So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.”

Jesus wants us to incorporate in our decision making the seeking of “God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,” as Paul prays in our Colossians reading. How do we do that?

Here is a suggestion for a way forward: “...when we face choices ...asking what God’s will is opens us to unexpected possibilities. I describe these new possibilities as “overflow” because they often burst the banks of our thinking. Overflow happens when we humbly set before God the challenge we face, and ask for help” (p. 21, Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream*).

Pray about the choices and wait for the Holy Spirit to give us an “overflow” response that bursts the banks of our thinking, and having been given an insight into “what we ought to do” in order to show mercy to those in need, step out in faith and take the first, concrete steps to realize it, and we will find God giving us all the “grace and power” we need to “to accomplish them.” In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**