

Sermon
St. Mary's Nanoose
July 10, 2016.
Luke 10:25-37
Who is my neighbour?

I think the story of the Good Samaritan is familiar to most of us. Jesus' message seems clear enough; our neighbour is the one who shows up in our life in need and requires a response from us. Jesus, as always, puts the emphasis on *relationship and need*; not on proximity or law. We are called to live into the new hearts we've been given; hearts that are moved by pity and empathy. So that in allowing our hearts to respond in the way they were created to respond, we re-create the world with God and bring the kingdom to life.

After the sermon today, instead of saying the Apostles' Creed, we will say the Shema, the affirmation of faith that begins.... "Hear, O Israel,.. " and which captures the words from Deuteronomy that the lawyer uses to respond to Jesus' question in today's gospel. "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."

The idea is to be aware of whom God will place in our path in our daily lives and to respond with courage and compassion; as we are able. It means not burying our heads in the sand and pretending that we don't see, or that we are too important, or that it's not our business, or..... you get the idea - there are a millions of excuses not to care. After all, the priest in today's reading was probably hurrying to

do a home communion, and the Levite was certainly out on important business.

I think of our friend Daniel, who lives in a small village in Nigeria. He and his wife, Esther, are devout Christians who 20 years ago, literally picked up a discarded baby along the roadside and brought it home to care for it, and raise it as part of their family. Poverty is rampant in Nigeria, although it is the wealthiest nation on the continent of Africa. Many mothers die unnecessarily and the fathers can't cope with a newborn, let alone any other children while trying to eke out a living. Especially if a child is handicapped in any way; the parent or parent(s) are hard pressed to care for it. And so it happened, that one by one, Daniel and Esther started collecting the children whom no one wanted or could care for. Christian or Muslim, it didn't matter. They welcomed every unwanted child into their home.

Today, they have 7 children of their own and over 300 children that they raise as their own; children who call and know them as mother and father. With no government funding, funded solely on donations from the west, Daniel and Esther have fed, housed, educated and provided medical care for a whole generation of young people. They never intended to run an orphanage, they just crossed the street to care for a neighbour, in this instance, a tiny baby in distress, and the rest is history. *Our relationships* determine our future; not our own personal plans. At least, when we are interested in a life that is lived in the fullness of God.

But there's even a deeper level to this reading, and indeed, to all the gospels which resonate beneath the surface and inform the whole of our calling. And this is the idea behind why we would *want to* respond to our neighbour; why we would give up our creature comforts to care for another. It has to do with the reality of our existence. Somehow in this culture, in this time and place, we have come to an understanding that we create our own reality, that we are in control, and that we make our own fortune. We like to think we are masters of our own destiny. There is something very flawed in this way of thinking because we have missed the most basic and amazing reality. And that is that our life is a *gift*. One we could never repay. We are indebted to the One that granted us this life. Hopefully we will want to acknowledge our indebtedness and not pretend otherwise. No, because out of gratitude for this gift of life, we are likely to respond with love, generosity, humility, in turn.

The only way I can really capture this reality for myself is to give you an example of an experience that parallels, in a small sense, this sense of enormous generosity and indebtedness.

For three years I traveled by ferry and bus to Vancouver to get my Masters of Divinity from the Vancouver School of Theology on the campus of UBC. Initially, I slept on the classroom floor 2-3 nights a week, rolling up my mattress and sleeping bag by 7:00 in the morning before the school day began. I found it pretty comfortable. It certainly was handy – the library was right there and there was no daily commute – and... the price was right. My then Director of Formation,

the Rev. Harold Munn, was asked by his wife one night, "Where does Selinde stay when she's in town?" Harold had no idea so asked me the next time he saw me. When he reported to his wife Claire that I was sleeping on the classroom floor, she was appalled. She insisted I come and stay with them. So for 3 years, from September to April, I enjoyed their gracious and generous hospitality. When I tried to bring food, Claire chided me gently saying, "Please, let us care for you while you're away from home." This past April I spend hours thinking how I could repay them for their amazing hospitality. When it finally came to me that I couldn't repay what I had received from them, I was moved to tears. I felt vulnerable; not quite as independent as I like to pretend I am. And in that moment, I caught a glimpse of the divine hospitality; the divine care and concern; the divine gift of life that can never be repaid. I understood that it's ludicrous to try. The point is not to focus on that which we want to repay; but to recognize the generous gift for what it is and to respond firstly with gratitude and then humbly by becoming more aware of the ways we can, in our own small way, extend hospitality or generosity.

Again, I find myself in the amazing position of being on the receiving end of generous hospitality as I stay with Bill and Jan Evans at least one night a week here in Nanoose in order to minimize my commute. I can't repay them. I can only truly know how blessed I am. And receive what is offered me. And knowing how blessed I am, bless others in turn. And in this way, enter the divine dance: giving where

we can give, receiving when as we are given. With grace and gratitude. Never expecting to be repaid, or to be able to repay.

The words of the Sufi poet, Hafiz, capture this sentiment beautifully:

Even after all this time, the sun never says to the earth: “
You owe me!”, “You owe me!”
Look what you can do with a love like that...
It lights up the whole sky

Even after all this time, the river never says to the sea,
“You owe me!”, “You owe me!”
Look what you can do with a love like that...
It covers the whole earth with life

Our life is not ours. It is a gift. And the only response to a gift is to step into the Divine Dance, sharing what was never ours to begin with – our wealth, our talent, our time. Our care and concern. Our love.

So this morning as we approach the table of the ultimate gift, perhaps we might open our hearts, asking to become the grateful and generous people we were created to be.

Amen.