

To whom am I a neighbour?

Saints, for the most part, are quite ordinary folk. You can't pick them out in a crowd. They are the ones who faithfully and quietly go about their business. They do not think of themselves as saints like the people embodied with halos in stained glass windows. They tend to be anonymous and hide from the limelight or headlines. They are people who journey through life with Christ and who strive to be salt of the earth or yeast in the dough. They do their best to shape their behaviour and their attitudes according to the Gospel. They admit when they fall short, and pray for the grace to grow and be changed. Occasionally, they are seen taking a stand in public, but often they are observed making their way to a place of worship, communicating love through action, offering hope and support in times of uncertainty, being generous with their time and money, and sometimes, building a bridge among people of differing views. Once in a while their witness is recognized and people may call them saints. In response, they usually point to the mercy and love of Christ and give God all the praise.

If Jesus shared the story of the Good Samaritan with us today, we might respond with the declaration, "My, that man from Samaria was indeed a saint." He seems to possess those qualities already mentioned: kindness, humility and a willingness to get involved by giving of his time and money in order to provide care, encouragement and hospitality to someone in need. Jesus holds up the witness of the Good Samaritan as one to emulate if people wish to be his followers.

The questions that arise from this parable and are placed before each of us are questions about our integrity. What would we do in a similar situation? Is there a consistency between our faith and witness? What is the condition of our life in Christ?

In all our scripture passages we are reminded of the importance of living with integrity. Integrity may be defined as "wholeness," "moral soundness," or "completeness." It is consistency between our inner and outer self. Carl Rogers called this trait "congruence." For a person to be whole, there needs to be congruence between one's inner thoughts and feelings that are matched by outward behaviour and actions. If we are people of faith then our love of Christ is visibly seen in our lives. In other words, we strive to "walk the talk."

James makes this point in the first chapter of his letter. "But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing." (James 1: 22–25, NRSV)

Eric Erikson, a psychologist who focused on human development, called the last stage of life, the Integrity vs. Despair Stage. Those older adults who have struggled to live with integrity, who have tried to live with consistency between their beliefs and actions across their whole lifetime, within changing contexts and roles, have been found to be more content, peaceful and whole.

Perhaps that is why Saint Paul encouraged all of his congregations to live by faith and to put their faith into practice. In the 12th chapter of Romans, the apostle writes:

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”
(Romans 12: 9–18, NRSV)

Living with integrity is difficult and yet that is our calling. It is an aspect of stewardship and mission. When we live with integrity we care for ourselves in a holistic sense, we reinforce our identity as children of God and we bear witness to Jesus Christ. When we connect our values and beliefs, they inform us how to act in any given situation.

The Good Samaritan is one who models integrity and compassion. By caring for the man wounded on the side of the road, the Samaritan does not deny his true self. Although his day is interrupted and has taken a turn out of the ordinary, he adjusts and tends to the needs at hand.

In the film, *Changing Lanes*, a car accident brings together people who would normally be from different worlds. Attorney Gavin Banek collides with insurance agent Doyle Gipson on New York’s FDR Highway during rush hour. Both men are racing to appointments. Gavin needs to be in court to present a probate judge with documents and Doyle has an appointment in court to get custody or visitation rights to his sons. When Gavin hands Doyle a blank cheque to fix his car, since he is in too much of a hurry to exchange papers, Doyle is stunned. Gavin speeds off leaving Doyle standing beside his disabled car, in the pouring rain.

As the film progresses, it is hard to tell the good guys from the bad, for the plot forces the characters to deal with a variety of moral quagmires. We get the impression

throughout the film that Gavin and Doyle genuinely wish to do the “right thing” but their attempts falter. The ethical dilemmas that taunt the characters are also turned upon the viewer, who must ultimately answer the question: How flexible are my ethics and codes of conduct? Issues of corporate and individual responsibility and life-giving and self-destructive behaviour are placed before the moviegoer.

After viewing this film, one can't help but think of the conversation Jesus shared with a young lawyer long ago. Like Jesus' parable, the film holds up a mirror encouraging us to reflect on our own lives. To whom am I a neighbour? Do I make room in my life for others? Do the needs of people matter? The young lawyer asked lots of questions and seemed to know the law but he did not embody the love of God. He was unable to perceive and respond to the suffering Jesus said existed. And yet, by reaching out to Jesus and engaging in a conversation, he was willing to be a little open. Do you think the young man was willing to grow in awareness that day? Is this not an important step to growing in compassion?

For many of us our neighbour is the one who lives on either side of our home. Or our neighbour may be a good friend. Some of us may name our colleagues at work as neighbours, and still others will say their customers and clients are neighbours. The parable of the Good Samaritan challenges us to consider that all of humanity is our neighbour.

Last October and November, the Government of Canada was host to several roundtables on Corporate Social Responsibility and the Canadian Extractive Sector in developing countries. One roundtable was held in Calgary where many corporations in mining, oil and gas thrive. The local Kairos group made a presentation urging the federal government to introduce mandatory human rights and environmental standards for the operations of Canadian companies offshore. One woman shared her concerns about the Pascua Lama project which involves open pit mining on the Chilean-Argentine border high up in the Andes Mountains. She spoke of how three glaciers are at risk of being destroyed due to this huge development. Her concern was for the next generation who will probably see the pure glacial water contaminated by cyanide or other waste products; for farmers in the San Felix Valley who would no longer have a water source for irrigating their fields; and for the quality of life of the indigenous people who have called that region home for thousands of years. To whom are we called to be a neighbour?

Closer to home, many in WMS groups and congregations have been supporting the Kairos campaign *Water: Life Before Profit*. In the first year of this campaign many Presbyterians sent post cards to the prime minister calling for water to be a basic human right. At the end of 2006, more than 285,000 Canadians signed post cards and 185

Canadian municipalities responded to the concerns from church and community groups by signing declarations affirming that water is a human right, not a commodity. By speaking out boldly, we helped raise awareness that water is indeed a sacred gift and a collective responsibility.

Rev. Iro is a minister in the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria and a Trainer of Trainers who educates AIDS educators, clergy and community leaders on the prevention of HIV infection. Rev. Iro served for one year as a southern partner and committee member of Presbyterian World Service & Development (PWS&D). During a PWS&D meeting he gave a short devotion on the Good Samaritan. He encouraged the members of the committee, saying, “Neighbours are to give life and hope. Neighbours must risk the stigma and shame of reaching out and helping the poor, especially those with HIV/AIDS, including the newly diagnosed, the dying, the thousands of orphans left behind, and those governments trying to cope with a crumbling infrastructure due to a lost generation of adults.”

WMS, youth and church groups have been “Making Connections Towards a World Without AIDS,” through the church’s study created for 2005–2007 by Karen Plater. Many have participated in workshops to grow in awareness about HIV and AIDS, worshipped on World AIDS Day or visited a local AIDS hospice. At the 16th International AIDS Conference in Toronto, 200 Canadian grandmothers joined 100 grandmothers from 11 countries in Africa to show solidarity and support for one another as they learned and shared the burden of coping with the AIDS pandemic.

We are loving neighbours when we seek to grow in awareness about HIV and AIDS; when we are not afraid to address the stigma that comes with HIV; and when we build networks to change public policy and promote human rights. We are loving neighbours when we raise money for those living in resource-poor countries and thus support partners who wish to train and equip home-based care workers, promote income-generating enterprises and care for orphan families.

If we reflect on the example of the Good Samaritan, if we make links between our beliefs and actions, if we are honest about our integrity then being concerned about local matters is not enough. Our partners in ministry, the reports produced at intergovernmental forums, and the Internet itself, have told us about global needs. We can choose to be silent, idle or turn away; but Jesus calls us to take an active part, to be an advocate for the “widow, orphan, and alien resident” and to bring the concerns of those who are “the least” and have no voice to those in places of power in order to serve justice with integrity and purpose.

Jean Vanier, one of the founders of L’Arche, says “there are two sorts of needs that

demand a response. It's very easy to lend someone money or drive them to a nearby city. It's a very limited demand; it has a beginning and an end. What is much more demanding is the second kind of demand. People ask you for food and you give it to them, but they're going to be hungry again in five hours. If only there was a magic pill which meant they didn't have to get hungry again today, and tomorrow, and the next day! This sort of request means unlimited meetings, because you don't know where it's going to lead." [Jean Vanier, *Be Not Afraid* (Toronto: Griffin House Press Limited, 1976), p. 88.]

The Good Samaritan went to great lengths to tend to the needs of the wounded man. He became aware of the man's needs, bound his wounds, carried him on his own animal to an inn and provided the funds to nurse him until he was well. Perhaps the challenge in this parable before us today, is to not only tend to the wounds of the many who suffer in the world, but also to grow in awareness and address the systemic issues and obstacles that invoke the wounds in the first place. It is to identify the reasons why the road between Jericho and Jerusalem was not safe. It is to work together, committed to finding solutions to complex problems. It is being willing to explore our interdependencies and to understand the impact we make on others. It is to move beyond questioning and debating, like the young lawyer, and getting involved, acting and being changed. It is being aware of how our daily decisions as consumers, investors and members of communities from within our families, workplaces and various environments relate to "the least of these." It is living with faith, courage and hope and remembering Jesus words to the disciples when our Lord said, "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." (Matthew 10:16, NRSV)

Our Lord Jesus cared deeply for the young man who felt he could approach him and enter into a conversation. We are to model this openness and be available to others who would like to ask us about our beliefs, mission and relationship with Jesus Christ. In *Living Faith* we are told not to "address others in a spirit of arrogance implying that we are better than they. But rather, in the spirit of humility, as beggars telling others where food is to be found," pointing "to life in Christ." (9.2.1, *Living Faith*)

In the parable of the Good Samaritan we are reminded that "mission is service, a call to help people in need and to permeate all of life with the compassion of God." (9.1.3, *Living Faith*) It is this love of Christ that has sustained the saints in service throughout the centuries. It is the love of God that strengthens us in ministry as we await the fulfillment of God's realm. In 1 John, we read: "We love because he first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." (1 John 4:19–22, NRSV)

As Christians we believe it is “the Holy Spirit who is the Lord and Giver of Life, the Renewer and Helper of God’s People.” (4.1.1, *Living Faith*) In whatever situations we find ourselves, Jesus calls us to trust in the Holy Spirit, to go where the Holy Spirit leads us and to attend to the needs of those the Holy Spirit entrusts to our care. When we perceive to be at the limit of our capabilities and declare we can do no more, then we are to turn to the Holy Spirit for the strength and wisdom we need. We are to be prayerful and open so that the Holy Spirit may guide us “into truth knowing that such truth may disturb and judge us.” We are to be faithful, people of integrity, for “where the presence of the Holy Spirit is evident...people are made whole, encouraged, and enabled to grow in Christ.” (4.3.4, *Living Faith*)

To whom are we called to be a neighbour?

May the Holy Spirit make that revelation clear as we strive as individuals and the church to live faithfully and with integrity, loving the Lord our God with all our hearts, and with all our souls, and with all our strength, and with all our minds.

To God be the glory. Amen.

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