

Another mass shooting, another community devastated, another community deeply grieves. Supreme Court decisions that increasingly show not only a lack of care for the oppressed, but also lack of care for the earth itself. The world seems so very heavy right now. So, I needed to hear Jesus' words today, words that always reroute us in the **only** direction God desires for us – the way of love and compassion for **all** others.

Have you ever met people who become so focused on the law that, for them, **their narrow** interpretation of the law is ultimate? When focus on the law – the ten commandments – becomes ultimate, the law is no longer received as gift. Then, obedience **to** the **law** becomes behavioral proof of faith. When this happens, the gospel message is no longer a word of love but one of judgement. **Grace** is no longer understood as God's gift to ALL people. When law becomes our focus, then our actions must be **justified** by **our** understanding **of** and obedience **to** the law as **humanly** defined. Far too often, this perspective allows us to live with the **illusion** that **we** are in control. It reinforces the idea that a life of discipleship is a life marked by knowing good from evil, rather than a life of knowing God and **God's mercy and grace**. The lawyer who encounters Jesus in today's gospel reading lives and functions out of this perspective. And Jesus' teaching

today means that this lawyer's **world**, as ordered by his increasingly narrow definition of neighbor, must end. You see, his definition of neighbor has been increasingly defined by the letter of the law and not by the **gospel** which is all about love and grace.

This lawyer, an expert in the Law of Moses – the Torah – is on a fishing expedition as he comes to **test** Jesus. He wants to know if Jesus will use the law in a proper way to answer his weighty question when he asks, "What must I **do** to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds by answering the question with another question. Jesus asks, "What do *you* think is the answer? What is written in the law? What do you read there that might address your question?" By doing this, Jesus forces the lawyer to put his cards on the table. When Jesus asks, "What do **you** think is the answer?" he slowly begins to reel the lawyer in. And it is as if this lawyer had been waiting for this opportunity all along because he intimately knows the law and Hebrew scriptures. So, he quickly responds by giving Jesus a comprehensive statement of proper ethical conduct as he says, "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 neighbor as yourself."

Jesus praises the answer, but he is not yet finished with this lawyer. So, he begins to pull the attorney into deeper conversation. He pulls him in

to the place where **proper words and proper actions meet**. It is here that Jesus offers a surprisingly simple summary statement. "**Do** this and you will **live**." Well, the lawyer takes the bait. He is **hooked**, and he continues his lawyerly line of questioning by asking, "Who is **my** neighbor?" Well, never missing an opportunity to teach, Jesus responds with a story.

Now, it is important to remember that Jesus' stories were designed to **shatter** perceptions and perspectives and **shake** people out of their mindset. The parables of Jesus were **not** meant to be comfortable, sweet stories. They were always meant to turn people's thinking inside out and upside down. In fact, one theologian calls Jesus' parables **narrative time bombs** designed to explode people's minds into new awareness.

Anyway, Jesus tells the suspenseful story of a man traveling the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. We can surmise from the way Jesus tells this story that the traveling man was probably Jewish because this was a road going right through the heart of Judea. In his story this traveler is ambushed, robbed, beaten, stripped, and left to die in a pool of blood. And the big question is who is going to stop and help? Two **experts** in the **law** walk right on past the beaten, nearly dead man. They **know** the commandments to love God and neighbor. But they **don't** stop to help a stranger at the point of death. The twist comes with the third traveler, a

Samaritan, an outsider, a hated enemy whose religious interpretation and practices make the lawyer's blood boil and his stomach churn. This reviled, despised **Samaritan** is the **only one** who shows the dying man hospitality, kindness, mercy, generosity, and love to the extreme. The one who is hated and reviled becomes the hero of the story and Jesus again shockingly turns social norms upside-down and inside-out!

The learned lawyer requested a definition of neighbor, and he receives a downright scandalous description of mercy, grace, and love, leaving him with the most soul-searching question of all. Of each of the characters in this story, where does he find **himself** and **who** is the neighbor?

This story does not bear the impact of parable for us because it is so familiar **to** us. But, if we were to reinterpret this story and understanding of neighbor for our own time, who are those we would least expect to see and comprehend as neighbor? Who are those who sit on the margins, stereotyped as being "less than" because their religious views, culture, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or even political views are different from us? Professor, author, and theologian Amy-Jill Levine, when teaching about this parable and the compassion of the Samaritan, insists,

We should think of ourselves as the person in the ditch and then ask, "Is there anyone, from any group, about whom we'd rather die than

acknowledge, 'She offered help' or 'He showed compassion'?" More, is there any group whose members might rather die than help us? If so, then we know how to find the modern equivalent for the Samaritan. To recognize the shock and possibility of the parable in practical, political, and religious terms, we might translate its first-century geographical and religious concerns into our modern idiom.

Who is the one who proved neighbor? Who is the one who loved God with heart, mind, soul, and strength and loved **neighbor** as the self?

In a lecture on this parable, before an audience who had experienced the horrors of 9/11 firsthand, Professor Levine suggested the one who proved to be neighbor was a member of Al-Qaeda. (Feasting on the Word, p. 242.)

So, for us, considering what is happening today in **our** culture, "Who are the ones who love God with heart, mind, soul and strength and love neighbor as self?" Wham!! Suddenly, for us, this parable begins to bear the perception shattering, explosive nature it did for our learned attorney. As we work on living together in society and community, the Samaritan lives **among** us by many other names, the names of **any** we consider enemies, **any** we loathe, **any** we consider "other". And the big surprise is that God shows up and is present in the most unlikely, unexpected places, working through the most unexpected people – even those we may despise.

Now, **our** definition of neighbor is redefined. Furthermore, consider the idea that **each one of us is the person in the ditch**, the one who lies

helpless and wounded beside the road, the one who needs to be rescued. And along comes a Good Samaritan, a Good Samaritan named Jesus – despised and rejected – **he** is the one who comes to save us, speak tenderly to us, tend to our wounds, lift us into his arms, and take us to the place of healing.

Today, we grieve regarding the injustice in our own culture. Our country is **not** practicing love. But the **gospel is love, and that is what we as Christians are called to live**. The **gospel of love** calls us to be present and to show up in the places of pain, to stand with **any** who are facing oppression. It is in those places of pain and oppression, under the shadow of the cross, where Jesus promises he will meet us to be present with us offering **mercy, love, hope, and transformation to new life**.

So, again, as we think about what is presently happening in our country, the question for each of us is **who** is your neighbor, **who** are **you** called to **serve**, to **love**, and be present to as **neighbor**? Who has been neighbor to **you**? Jesus Christ, the **crucified** one has been neighbor to you. Have you felt God's mercy **make your own heart merciful, compassionate, and loving**? Then in your heart you will know what this means: **Go and do likewise!**