

Like any good story, the parable of the Good Samaritan has more than one point. We're going to look at at least two of them this morning. The most familiar of the messages of this story Jesus told is the one about the universality of neighbor-ness. There are no familial or ethnic or religious or cultural boundaries to the neighborhood. Who is my neighbor? the questioner asks Jesus. And the answer is, everybody. Including the one you're most sure can't possibly qualify as a neighbor, the one you've been hoping to keep firmly on the far side of the border, the Samaritan. You may remember how perplexed the woman at the well was when Jesus asked her for water, because "Jews share nothing in common with Samaritans." Yet Jesus came to her as a neighbor, and respected her religious frame so that she and other members of her community could see him as fulfilling their own deepest hopes.

In addition to the message of the universality of neighbor-ness, there is another surprising and challenging thing going on in this story. Because the Samaritan is not the needy person who deserves our care; the Samaritan is the one who does the caring. This upends our expectation that the member of the minority group, the one we may see as "other," will be dependent on our good will. The Samaritan is not the object of help, he is the subject, the helper.

There is something radical Jesus is doing in this story, something about point of view. The lawyer who comes to Jesus asks, "Who is my neighbor?" And his concern is, OK, I get it, I have to love my neighbor as myself...but who qualifies as my neighbor, so that I have to love them? In answer, Jesus tells his story, giving the universal answer to the original question: neighbors aren't just people in your ethnic or religious club; all humans are neighbors. But he follows up with his own question of the lawyer. "Which of these was a neighbor to the wounded man?" Do you see what he's doing there? How the point of view has shifted? The lawyer is asking, essentially, which people in need do I have to stop and help? And Jesus asks him to take the point of view of the one in need of help. Because that's the point of view that matters most to God. If I do come across a person who needs my care, the question I need to be asking myself is not, Is this person a neighbor whom I have to help? but rather, Will this person see *me* as a neighbor? Not, Does this person count as a neighbor? but Do *I* count as a neighbor?

This message about whose point of view matters most must have come across very clearly in Jesus' teaching, because both Luke and Matthew, who do not always have the same central concerns, put this across very strongly. In Matthew it comes in the form of the parable of the Judgment of the Nations. The people being judged ask, "When did we see you naked, or hungry, or in prison, or a stranger in need of welcome?" And the judging king says, "Just as you helped one of the least of these, you helped me." Again, whose point of view matters most here? Whose point of view does God take? God takes the point of view of the ones in greatest need, and God sees you as they have seen you.

Of course, this also means that when you have been the person with the least power in any situation, the person in greatest need, then God was seeing the situation through *your* eyes. When you were harassed or bullied or abused or assaulted, when your need went unseen and unmet, then it was your point of view that mattered to God. Jesus preached that, and then on the cross it became more real than any sermon or story, as God saw our world through the eyes of a wrongly executed prisoner.

Back to Luke—at the end of the strange parable of the dishonest steward, when the manager who cheated the owner is found out, he attempts to ensure his future by writing off some of the debts owed to the owner, so that the debtors will be there for him after he is fired. Surprisingly, the owner commends the manager. And Luke states the moral of the story: Make friends for yourselves with your dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, these friends may welcome you into the eternal homes. Robert Tannehill, a former colleague of mine and a big-name Lukan scholar, said that that sentence was a key part of Luke's theology; as Tannehill put it, Luke thinks that the poor will get to vote on whether you get into heaven. You'd better do what you can to get them on your side now! God will ask the poor, the marginalized, the outcast, "Was this person a neighbor to you?"

Story time! I'm going to tell you a story about one of my favorite saints. In the late 1100's in England, a man named Hugh was the bishop of the diocese of Lincoln. This was a period in England when Christian people would routinely lynch Jews. Jews, not through their own scheming but due to Christian law, were the only folks allowed to lend money at interest, so that—in addition to their outsider status—set them up to be resented and hated. Often Christians in one city would riot against the Jews, who lived mostly in ghettos in the cities, and a wave of pogroms would spread from city to city throughout England. But not to Lincoln,

because Hugh would put a stop to it. There's one story of people forming an anti-Jew lynch mob in Lincoln, and Hugh coming out in full bishop regalia and telling them, "OK, you're all excommunicated if you don't put down your weapons and go home RIGHT NOW." (This worked. Is this not The Best Use of the power of excommunication you've ever heard?)

There's another story involving a plot by merchants to make money by demonizing Jews. A Christian man in a town in the diocese of Lincoln was murdered by person or persons unknown. A bunch of merchants in that town got together and spread the story based on zero evidence that this man had been murdered by Jews, because that by 12th century Christian logic would make him a martyr, and \*that\* in turn would mean that the merchants could set up a shrine as a pilgrimage site and get the tourist trade. When Bishop Hugh got wind of this, he rode out there and tore down the shrine with his own episcopal hands!

Now, for a medieval bishop, every single person in the diocese counted as a neighbor, as someone for whom he was responsible, EXCEPT the Jews. How did Hugh come to see the Jews as his neighbors?

We have of course seen this, this belief in common human worth transcending ethnic and religious boundaries, in all sorts of people. Though it is rare everywhere, it does show up everywhere. In Nazi-dominated Europe a tiny minority of non-Jews risked their lives and the lives of their families to save Jews. In the first great genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman Empire's campaign to rid themselves of the Armenian Christians, there were Muslims, both Arab and Turkish, who risked their lives to save Armenians. Really risked their lives: in most cases it was a capital offense to refrain from killing Armenians on sight, let alone help them. Plus they were told by the higher-ups that killing infidels would get them a free pass to heaven. Nonetheless, there were Muslims who firmly believed it was God's will that they save people rather than massacre them.

Was Bishop Hugh's protection of the Jews connected with an ability to see the situation from the point of view of the one most in need? We do have some other evidence of Hugh's ability to do this. For instance, he was known for personally visiting and taking care of those called lepers, whose disease-produced deformities made them disgusting to many healthy people. When asked why he touched them, he said, It is my soul that the leper heals with his kiss. He did not

just see the leper as the needy object of his care; there was some deeper mutuality going on for him.

Also: kids could only be confirmed by a bishop, but if you were an average person who lived in the boonies, you had no way of getting your kid to a bishop. You just had to try to catch the bishop whenever he might be passing through your neck of the woods and ask him to do the confirmation on the fly. Hugh's biographer makes a special point of reporting that when Hugh was asked to do such a confirmation, when people brought their kid to him to be confirmed when he was traveling through, Hugh would GET OFF HIS HORSE to do the confirmation! OK, as a professor of pastoral care I love this story because it tells us quite a lot about the generally sorry state of pastoral care by bishops in 12<sup>th</sup>-century England. But it also may tell us that Hugh cared not only about his official duties but about how a powerless child from an unimportant family would see *him*.

When Hugh died, the local Jews could not of course attend the funeral mass, but they lined the streets of Lincoln to honor the procession with his coffin. I think that Luke would believe that the same sort of people lined the streets of heaven to welcome Hugh home. He had used his power and privilege to make friends for himself among the marginalized, and those friends were there to welcome him into the eternal homes. God looked at Hugh through their eyes, through the eyes of Jews in danger of lynching, through the eyes of lepers cast out of society, through the eyes of children with no social standing, and what God saw was a neighbor and a friend.

We often ask God to grant us vision, to open our eyes or, as in today's hymn, to open our ears—to enlarge our field of perception, to enable us to see and hear what God is calling us to do. Perhaps we can think of that gift of perception also as a shift in point of view, so that we come to see the world *and ourselves* from the point of view of the one with the least power, the one on the other side of the border or the one living here without papers, the one subject to arrest and imprisonment or worse for driving while black, the one who is queer or trans and struggling to get through adolescence alive, the one being demonized, the one who is hungry or sick or in prison or a stranger. Like Hugh of Lincoln, like the Muslims who saved Armenian Christians, may we *count* as neighbors in the eyes of the marginalized, which is to say, in the eyes of God.