

PROPER 10, July 14, 2019, Year C

- A few years ago I learned about some interesting historical research. It was about those who sought to rescue Jews and others during the Holocaust. The researchers found a marked distinction between *two differing ways of responding to people in need*. Some responders taking the *first* approach, when encountering someone experiencing misfortune, would ask questions like, "*how did this happen to you? What caused you to be in trouble?*" By contrast, those taking the *second* approach would respond to people in need *without inquiring about why* they were in trouble. This research supported an observation ~ *when we ask about the circumstances that have caused someone to be in need, we create a layer of complication, between them and us*. And this is why: when we ask other people *how* they came to be in trouble, *we suggest a possible conditionality to our response ~ that our willingness to help them might depend on the content of their answer*. Even if our question sounds *innocent*, and appears only to reflect *natural curiosity*. Yet, the person being asked this question often feels like an *element of judgment* has come into the picture.¹
- Now *this seems significant*, especially in regard to our Gospel story today. Aside from the examples of the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan, we can notice *another* important contrast. It is between the *initial* question asked by the lawyer, and the *later* question asked by Jesus. For *there is a significant difference between them, even though the two questions sound remarkably alike*. So similar, that we might not notice how *subtly* Jesus re-phrases the question. Here's how we notice the difference: The *lawyer*, after receiving Jesus' affirmation regarding his summary of the law, *still wants to engage him*. So he asks Jesus, "And *who* is my neighbor?" Naturally, we hear Jesus' ensuing story *as shaped by* the lawyer's question. *As if Jesus wants to show the lawyer whom we should recognize, and regard, as our neighbor*.
- But notice how *Jesus inverts the question!* The man asks, "*who* is my neighbor?" But Jesus asks, "*who proved to be neighborly... or, who acted*

like a neighbor?" In other words, Jesus' story is not an illustration of *how we recognize who is our neighbor*. Jesus' story is about *how acting like a neighbor toward other people, helps them become our neighbor*.

- *Like the lawyer*, when we look at folks *wondering who is, or who might be our neighbor*, inevitably, we pursue the question with some *criteria* in mind. *And that's the rub!* We might pursue the question by assuming that a neighbor is *someone who lives nearby*; or perhaps *someone who shares my community values*; or maybe *someone whose kids go to the same school that my kids do*. It puts *us* in the position of making distinctions among folks *based on their attributes*. And it's always possible that we misperceive another person's identity. We might blindly overlook his or her *genuine* status as our neighbor. *Or*, we might indiscriminately grant to a person *who is unconnected with us* this same *neighbor-status*. In each case, *our effort will involve trying to gain greater precision in our discernment about who does, or does not, qualify as our neighbor*.
- *By contrast*, suppose I go through each day, trying to live out a different approach. I will remind myself that *I can choose to act neighborly to everyone* I meet, *not just to some* of them. *Neighbor-status, is therefore something I enable by my approach to another person, and not by my evaluation of his or her qualifications. This is what Jesus was getting at* in his story. His *re-phrasing* of the lawyer's question establishes *a distinction with a clear and significant difference*. *Charity, in its basic, biblical, meaning of God-like love, is something we practice, and extend to others*. It is therefore *not* something evoked *by qualities we apprehend* in another person. Being a neighbor is an *entrée into a relationship, a relationship that we offer* to another person, *rather than something we recognize in* another person. This applies as much to people in our community and church, as it does to people who are homeless.

- Here we need to remember that *clear distinctions of principle are not always easy or straightforward to apply*. Think about some *typical* life situations that might be test cases for the application of Jesus' distinction. Consider, for example, the man I see standing at a street corner, and holding up a 'please help' sign ~ *is he my neighbor?* To ask *this*, is to mimic the lawyer's way of posing the question. For I will then ask myself, *is he (or is he not)* my neighbor. But that *isn't* Jesus' way of putting the question. Instead, Jesus would encourage us to ask something different: "*Will I, and can I, be a neighbor to this person?*" The lawyer's form of the question is in some ways easier to answer, and is more likely to yield a simple 'yes' or 'no.' Jesus' form of the question is *more challenging, but in the end, also more insightful*.
- Let's notice this: *if our primary way of asking the question is shaped by the lawyer, we tend to become abstract and impractical in our approach*. Pursuing the lawyer's question could lead us to conclude that *all people* in this world are our neighbors. *But if all people are our neighbors, then it may be less important to us, because everyone then becomes 'a neighbor.'* And we will forget to make distinctions among our numerous neighbors based on our *actual* ability to help them. A consequence is that we may become more focused on *abstract examples* of who our neighbor is, say, the poor in Bangladesh, as compared with much more concrete examples of who our neighbors might be, like those who live about a mile west of here.
- *Yet, if our primary way of asking the question is shaped by Jesus, we are more likely to be concrete and effective, when we pursue it honestly. To whom can I prove neighborly? Who can I best treat as a neighbor, when it comes to helping someone in need?* The answer may be *a both-and*, and *not an either/or*; and the answer is more likely to be tilted toward those whose are geographically *near* me and *struggling*, than those who struggle to live half way 'round the world. There's lot's of wisdom in the bumper-sticker slogan, "*Think globally; act locally.*" For we can often make a greater

impact *when we act neighborly* toward those whom we can see and *speak with*, and with whom we can form *more than* a passing relationship.

- This is what is *particularly significant* about our involvement in IHN, the Interfaith Hospitality Network, of which our parish is a founding member. In my experience, *Family Promise*, and its IHN program, follows the second, *non-asking approach* to people in need. We have on average 60 or so volunteers *for each of the weeks* during which we provide hosting (3–4 times a year). *Through IHN, we have the opportunity to interact with, and be neighbors to, those who come to stay with us.* This is one of our most significant service ministries, which *–along with our IHN parish-partners–* has a positive and measurable impact on reducing homelessness in Grand Rapids. *Together, we are learning about how to be better neighbors* to those who live with us in Kent County. As time goes by, *we may see how we can be neighborly* in other ways *to more people* ~ and to people who have a variety of *real needs, right here* in our own neighborhood.



Sadao Watanabe, *The Good Samaritan*

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "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." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Notes:

¹ I learned about this research from my friend, Stuart Levine, longtime professor of psychology at Bard College in New York state.