

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 15th SUNDAY -C-

Deuteronomy 30: 10-14 Psalm 69 Colossians 1: 15-20 Luke 10: 25-37

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

“Who is my neighbor?” That’s the question a scholar of the law asks Jesus in today’s gospel. It is meant as a test for Jesus. Jesus turns the question around and it becomes a test for the one asking the question. And it becomes a test for us who are listening in on the discussion.

The neighbor stirs us memory for me; does it do the same for you? Does it remind you, as it does me, of childhood memories of where you grew up? Does the question bring to mind the neighbors next door, up the street or on the neighboring farm? Well for us growing up in Brooklyn, it wasn’t the next farm, our neighbor was Mrs. Weissman in the next apartment. She was a Jewish widow and had two boys, Jules and Herbert, and we played on the street together. My mom and Mrs. Weissman traded fresh baked food. When we could smell the sweet rolls Mrs. Weissman was baking we knew that pretty soon we would get to taste them. It was what neighbors did. We had neighbors downstairs, they were the owners of the four-family house we lived in. My sister and I walked to school with their children, Mary Ann and Louie, along with the Irish kids in the next house.

When one of our mothers had to go out, the people next door kept an eye on us. We played stickball on the street and “Kick the Can.” Parents kept an eye on the kids from their apartment windows; not just their kids, but the neighbors’ kids too. We were neighbors. Some people occasionally complained about the noise of those street games, and, except for an occasional fist fight, we got along fairly well—there were no guns around then. On sweltering summer nights, we sat on stoops and waited for the sound of the bells of the Good Humor ice cream truck. People weren’t necessarily following religious rules about good behavior towards neighbors. It was just how we behaved towards each other. “You help me when I need help; I’ll be there for you when you need help.” We were neighbors.

The man who asked Jesus the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” knew the answer from the religious teachings of the bible and the sages. He quotes from two biblical books (Deuteronomy 6: 5 and Leviticus 19:18), “You shall love the Lord your God with all you heart, with all your being, with all your strength

and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.” He knew the right answer and Jesus tells him, “You have answered correctly.” He was feeling pretty satisfied and could say to himself, “I live a good life. I don’t hurt anyone. I am good to my neighbors.” It’s what most of the people in my parish church around the corner could have said. It’s what a lot of us in church today could say too. Like the man we know the answer from “the Good Book.” But the man didn’t know who his neighbor was; at least not the way Jesus would spell out neighbor. In Brooklyn the neighbor lived in the neighborhood, a pretty confined geographical area. In Jesus’ time and among his people, “neighbor” wasn’t just those physically close to you, those in “the neighborhood,” it was broader than that--- it was any Jewish person. Still, like us, they had a restricted sense of neighbor.

So, feeling quite satisfied with himself, the man, thinking he knew the right answer, asks Jesus, about neighbors, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus responds with a parable. Oh, oh! Now the yellow warning light starts to blink, because whenever Jesus tells parables he always upsets our mindsets and expectations. Parables call us to rethink our assumptions. Like the scholar of the law, we may think we know the answer—until Jesus begins to tell a parable. Then, if we are listening and surrender ourselves to the parable, chances are we will learn something new about God, ourselves----and our neighbor.

The parable of the Good Samaritan can suffer from over exposure. We have heard it often enough, we have named hospitals, soup kitchens and churches after it. But sometimes we can miss, or not ponder sufficiently, the final question Jesus asks, “Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers’ s victim?” The question isn’t, “Who is my neighbor?”, but “Which person was the neighbor to the victim?” We can’t ask, “Is she my neighbor? Is he my neighbor?” But rather-- when there is a need, then I am the neighbor to the one in need, regardless of who they are. As in the case of the Samaritan, wounds should move us to compassion, and we shouldn’t see what separates us from another person. Note, the wounded person was coming from Jerusalem, so the strong hint is that he was a Jew. The man who helped was a Samaritan. Between those two groups there were centuries of hatred and religious rivalry. The parable is timeless, isn’t it, as we face the religious tensions around the world that continue to erupt into violence, distrust and terrorism?

When another has needs, Jesus teaches, then we are neighbors. There are no

reserve clauses. It's not very complicated, is it? We don't need a university theology course to understand what Jesus is teaching, do we? It's not about whether people deserve our help or not. Whether they are grateful or not. Whether they are "the deserving poor," or not. It turns out that the neighborhood I grew up in left out a lot of other people. We were a "friendly neighborhood," unless an African American or Puerto Rican tried to move in. When they did, a lot of "neighbors" moved out.

A lot of us grew up watching "Mr. Rodgers" on television. It was a program for kids and we who watched it were welcomed into "Mr. Rodgers' neighborhood." Mr. Rodgers was a Presbyterian minister, though he didn't proselytize. He welcomed a vast audience into his "neighborhood." He talked about neighbors being honest, respectful and helpful. Each program started with his opening his arms to all children and asking, "Won't you please be my neighbor?"

We build walls between us: in our homes, neighborhoods, nation and in the world. Jesus wants to dismantle them, stone by stone. In many of our parishes, the ushers wear name tags and they welcome arriving worshipers. Jesus is saying that, when another has need, we must realize that we are wearing a name tag and it says, "I am your neighbor." That's not an easy thing to be in a suspicious and selfish world. The Eucharist we share today is the food that nourishes the neighboring spirit in each of us and in our community as well. How else, but with this food, can we ever expect to be the kind of neighbor Jesus was and calls us to be?

QUOTABLE

A... shock is the discovery that a despised Samaritan, himself most at risk in this dangerous no man's land of deserted territory, takes the chance of stopping, looking, and –increasing his own vulnerability—leading the man on his beast to an inn. It is the hated enemy who is the hero with a human heart.

More stunning still is the use to which Jesus turns the parable. The point, we learn, is not who deserves to be cared for, but rather the demand to become a person who treats everyone encountered—however frightening, alien, naked or defenseless—with compassion: "you go and do the same." Jesus does not clarify a point of law but transmutes law to gospel. One must take the same risks with one's life and possessions that the Samaritan did!

—Luke Timothy Johnson in, SACRA PAGINA, edited by Daniel J. Harrington, S. J. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991, page 175. ISBN 0-8146-5805-9.

PRAYER FOR PEACE

Please commit to praying daily for an end to the war in Iraq. We invite you to join us in praying the "Prayer for Peace in Iraq and the Middle East" prepared by Pax Christi UK.

We come to you, God Creator.
You are the source of life and beauty and power.
Your son Jesus is the way of faith and hope and love.
Your Spirit is the fire of love, the fount of wisdom, the bond of unity.
You call us at all times to be people of the Beatitudes,
Witnesses to the Gospel of peace and love and forgiveness.
You call us at this time, when war, and rumors of war, weigh heavily on the
peoples of Iraq and the Middle East.

Their lives are already broken by suffering and violence.

We renew our acceptance of Your call. We promise to work:
* To bring the light of the Gospel to those living in darkness,
* To bring the hope of the Gospel to those living in despair,
* To bring the healing of the Gospel to the lonely, the disadvantaged, the
marginalized,
* And to bring the peace of the Gospel to a divided world.

Amen.

—from Mary Doyle, the editor of the peace and justice newsletter of the Diocese of Oakland, Ca.

JUSTICE NOTES

Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29)

“Recent news stories have highlighted the polarization that the issue of immigration has caused in our state and our nation. Immigrants live among us. They serve us in our restaurants and hotels, clean our homes, harvest our produce,

tend to our yards, and provide us with technical expertise and factory labor. Many are entrepreneurs creating employment opportunities for others. Their children go to our schools. Their families go to our Churches. ***They are our neighbors.***”

“We recall Christ's teaching parable of the Good Samaritan which he offered in response to the question: And who is my neighbor? Jesus made the Samaritan—who was looked upon as an unholy outcast and foreigner—the model because he came to the aid of the injured man who was a stranger to him. Now is our chance to come to the aid of those among us who come from a foreign land. Now is our chance to care about the strangers whom Jesus called our neighbors!”

“We understand the polarization and frustration over this issue because the status quo serves neither the immigrant nor the citizenry well. For that reason, we call on people of faith to welcome the strangers among us as our neighbors and we implore our national legislators to give us a law that reforms immigration in a way that protects human dignity and promotes the common good. In light of the Gospel, we call for an answer that is humane, realistic and responsible while also serving our nation's economic and security needs.”

“Specifically, we call for:

- Reform that includes earned legalization for the undocumented and their families, a temporary worker program, and timely family reunification policies;
- Restoration of due process protections for immigrants;
- Policy directions that address the root causes—so that migrants can remain in their home countries and support themselves and their families; and
- Reform that does not include sanctions for those who provide humanitarian aid for the undocumented.”

“We expect our public officials to work together in a bipartisan fashion to create a new immigration system which respects our common humanity, reflects the values of fairness, compassion and opportunity and recognizes that we *are* a nation of immigrants.” (*California Catholic Conference of Bishops' Statement on Immigration Reform And who is my neighbor?*)

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Danny Frogg #0137368 (On death row since 3/27/98)
- Allen Holman #0587681 (4/7/98)
- Clinton Smith #0507433 (4/13/98)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606