

Trinity 13 (3 September 2023)

“But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’”

+In the Name...

Am I the only one who finds it interesting how complicated we as human beings can make even the simplest things? I know that in first century Jerusalem there were not subdivisions in the American sense, but the concept of a neighbor could not have been that foreign. Often times when what seems like an obvious question is asked, the person asking is hoping for an answer that will somehow be better than what he is afraid the answer is. For example, we are familiar with the man who asks Our Lord how many times he must forgive his brother. The man thinks he is being generous when he suggests “seven times”. He is unprepared for Jesus’ answer of “70 times seven”. I suggest to you the same is going on here. This man, St. Luke thinks it important

enough to tell us that he is a lawyer, probably knows exactly who his neighbor is. But what can he lose? If Christ answers anything short of “everybody”, then this young lawyer has saved himself some work. Christ’s answer is not “everybody” exactly, but closer to “anybody who needs it”. That might be worse because it means we have to pay attention so that we know who is in need. Rarely in our lives do we find someone beaten and left for dead on the side of the street. Having lived in small towns and large cities alike I can honestly say it has never happened to me.

Ironically, those in the most need usually seem to be the most in need when it is least convenient for us. There used to be a radio ad on in Portland – about 20 years ago now, I suppose. A man was praying for guidance on how he could better serve God. “Oh Lord, please direct me on how I can most help your people.” [Ding-dong.] The doorbell rang. It was the Girl Scouts collecting canned food for the

poor. “Not now,” he says. “I am praying to God for guidance on how I can be of use to Him.” He resumes his praying. “Oh God, please show me...” The phone rings, and he answers it. “No, Mom, I can’t take you to your doctor’s appointment right now. I am praying to God on how I can be of service to His people. I’ll have to call you back.” I do not now remember all the interruptions this man had to endure, but you get the idea. He did not have a clue who his neighbors were.

Neighbors can be relative to what else we are enduring at the time. We often see this in politics. With the advent of popular primaries, as opposed to the smoke-filled backrooms of the old-time political parties, the candidates rush to the extreme ends of the spectrum. In both parties the “fringe groups” run candidates in opposition to the “Establishment” candidates. At the time of the general election everyone runs back to the middle to attract the coveted so-called “independent” voters. Those same candidates who

could not stand one another in the primary season are the best of pals in the general election. This phenomenon is not limited to our own country. Look at the failed referendum in Scotland: Two countries joined politically for some 300 years seemed to no longer tolerate one another. Or the petitions circulating in California after the 2016 election attempting to secede from the US. Or the counties in Oregon who wish to become part of Idaho. Were any of these places being invaded by someone from another continent, I suspect that the English and the Scotch, the Californians, or the Oregonians in question would be happy to work together for a common goal. In the movie The Scarlet and the Black Msgr. Hugh O'Flaherty, comes to the aid of two English soldiers. "Boy, Father, are we sure glad you are pro-English" one of the men comments. The indomitable monsignor replies something to the effect of, "I never thought I would be accused of that." But the monsignor was being a good neighbor.

Many of us can think of instances even closer to our own lives than politics or Gregory Peck. How many families are torn by strife, often instances where no one can remember what the issue was? They can turn into regular Hatfield-McCoy Feuds, lasting more than a generation. I need not ask the rhetorical question of whether the Hatfields and McCoy's were good neighbors.

Perhaps we think we can take care of it "later". But will later ever come? Do we ever think to ourselves, "The next time such-and-such situation presents itself I'll be a good neighbor – that is, I'll do what I ought. The scribe Ben Sirach warns against such thinking in the segment appointed for our Old Testament lesson at Morning Prayer: "The Lord gave them few days, and a short time, and power also over the things therein." It reminds me of the quotation from the 14th chapter of Job that you will find in the burial rite of the Book of Common Prayer: "Man that is born of a woman, hath but a short time

to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay.” Truly medical science has made great strides in the last century, but the average lifespan of a human person is only so long. Everyone agrees that one’s time seems to hasten as one grows older. Consider then that the Church has been around for two millennia. We may think that we occupy space on this planet for a long time, but in the grand scheme of things we do not.

My favorite movie of all time has to be Dead Poet’s Society. And while I would never have claimed to get my theology from Robin Williams, his earnest advice to the boys of the fictional Welton Academy is priceless: He quotes Robert Herrick’s poem: “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, Old Time is still a-flying; And this same flower that smiles today, Tomorrow will be dying.” “Carpe diem,” he tells them. “Seize the day, boys!”

Ben Sirach would approve. Allow me to quote further from the Old Testament lesson: “He gave them (that’s us) glory in His marvelous acts for ever, that they might declare His works with understanding. And the elect shall praise His holy name.” He is telling us to be good neighbours to all. And we do that by declaring His works and praising His name. Now that will come for us in many forms. Maybe one of us will be called to minister to a dying man on the side of the road, but for most of us it will be more subtle. Especially for us as Anglicans; as a group we are not generally comfortable talking about our faith. Nor are we the types to go door to door or stand on the street corner. That is fine, and do not think I am asking you to do those sorts of things. But that does not excuse us from being good neighbours. If anything, we must get more creative about how we will be good neighbours, in order to do what God is calling us to do.

So on your way home today, or as you go about your daily routine this week, think of how you might be a good neighbor. Just because you make it home without finding a dying man on the side of the road, do not think that you have escaped any responsibility. Nor should you ease your conscience by thinking you will do “something” (anything?) later. Heaven forbid we run out of time for later. Carpe diem. Seize the day. Your neighbors are counting on you.

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