

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR? BEING A VILLAGE OF GOOD SAMARITANS

Deuteronomy 30:11-14

Luke 10:25-37

Here we are in the middle of another Hurricane Awareness week. Just life as usual in Baja, in September. We scurry around gathering extra water, food, covering up belongings with tarps, taking down items the wind might whisk away, caulking windows, filling sandbags. But what, if any, would you say are the positive sides of Hurricanes?

(wait for some answers)

Hurricanes, like most natural disasters, tend to bring out the best in the human spirit. We band together to get ready. We offer encouragement to one another. We do favors for people we might not otherwise give the time of day too. And after it's all over, when we begin to clean up, pick up the pieces, that Good Neighbor feeling carries. We work together to clean up yards, put houses back together, mop up the water, check on friends we haven't heard from, respond with food and clean water to those who lost everything.

In essence, we remember to actually walk the Christian life we talk so much about.

And it's a challenge, not just during natural disasters, but every day. Who is my neighbor?

Rob Bell, pastor of Mars Hill Church in Grand Rapids, MI shares a story from when his church began. It grew from 1000 people to 4000 people in the first six months. And he soon learned that rapid growth doesn't always bring out the best in people.

He says, "I remember telling people we had no more chairs and if they wanted to bring their friends, they would need to buy chairs for them. By September we were holding three services to accommodate 4000 people.

"A problem developed in the parking lot because people were losing their tempers when they had to wait so long to exit. I heard several stories of harsh words being exchanged and people giving each other the finger. So I stood up one Sunday and said, 'If you hark here and you aren't a Christian, we are thrilled to have you in our midst. We want you to feel right at home. But if you are here and you're a Christian, and you can't even be a Christian in the parking lot, please don't go out into the world and tell people you're a Christian. You'll screw it up for the rest of us. And by the way, we could use your seat.' People cheered." (Velvet Elvis by Rob Bell, pages 100-101)

How do we live Christ with the people around us?

In the book of Deuteronomy, God tells the Israelites that doing the right thing is not some deep, indiscernible mystery. God spends time going over his covenant with the people of Israel just before they enter into the Promised Land. And he's emphasizing the kind of relationship he wants with them. One that is close, personal, based on doing the right thing. He reminds them that they have all the tools they need for this life adventure. That he is not one of those far away, distant gods, but that he is a God living with them, giving their hearts direction.

Deuteronomy 30:11-14 (NIV)

11 Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. 12 It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" 13 Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" 14 No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

God is saying to Israel: your duty was not hidden in some inaccessible place (like heaven) or beyond an impossible barrier (beyond the sea). My divine command is not far off, *but near*. My law is at everyone's door. This is how much I love you! Repeat it over and over until it enters your heart and flows out from your life. You do not have to understand the deep mysteries of the universe to make God-based decisions. Even if there are secrets yet to be revealed, right now you can enjoy life by loving God and by loyally obeying my covenant. You can act on it now; just do it.

Another version reads this Scripture as follows:

This command I give you today:

*Not confusing,
Not far,
Not in the sky,
Not in the sea.*

*No one forced to climb to the sky!
No one compelled to sail the sea!*

*No one crying, "Who will tell us?"
No one pleading "How should we do this?"*

The command I give you today:

Very close,

*Close,
In your Mouth,*

*Closer still,
In your Heart.*

Just do it!

These verses remind us that if we embrace the Word of God deep into our hearts, into the very core of who we are, then we do not have to question what is right, what is wrong, what to do, what not to do, it will be obvious. There will be no hesitation. There will simply be action.

Jesus illustrates this very concept in Luke 10 in the story of The Good Samaritan. It is hard for us to experience the shock of Jesus' original audience. Because to a Jew, every Samaritan was *bad*. There were no *good* Samaritans.

But we grew up hearing this story, only knowing of Samaritans as *good*. The story doesn't surprise us at the end because we expect the Samaritan to do the good thing.

I suppose if the story were about Shiite Muslims and Evangelical Christians, it might have a fresh slant for us . . . it might have us examine that question of "Who is my neighbor?" a bit more closely.

If you think back to this story in Luke, you will recall that there was a victim (a Jew), a perpetrator (the robbers), and a rescuer (the Samaritan). However, there were also two bystanders. Two religious officials who come upon the beaten man on the side of the road, by pass him by, not wanting to get involved. Not wanting to become a part of this particular story.

And they are whom I want to focus on this morning. The innocent bystanders. Because they knew the right thing to do. They knew the law. They knew about caring for the sick, giving hospitality to the stranger, assisting someone in need. But they chose to keep going, to pretend they saw nothing, to not get involved.

They knew the right thing to do, and didn't do it. How do we live Christ with the people around us?

Our church was recently confronted with this story. Barbara Spencer, a friend to many of us who runs a Children's Breakfast Charity in Vista Hermosa, heard about an American named Christopher who was sick in the hospital. Months earlier, Christopher had attempted to end his life by jumping off his apartment building in Cabo. He survived the jump. He ended up in Salvatierra Hospital in La Paz. Very weak. Confused. Couldn't feed himself. Wasting away. He had no family. There was no one to take care of himself. He was going to die without intervention.

Barbara felt compelled to recruit people to take turns feeding Christopher breakfast, lunch and dinner. She sent an email to the people of Crossroads. No one responded. She came to me in disbelief.

"Joyce, I don't understand. I heard from no one."

I tried to explain that some people have a fear of hospitals, others work, some don't have the gift of compassion. Blah, Blah, Blah.

She looked me dead in the eye and said, "But Joyce, Jesus commanded us to feed the hungry, to visit those in the hospitals. How can we *not* do this?"

Don't you just love being nailed by another Christian?

Because she was right. Who is my neighbor? When it came to Christopher, Crossroads walked by on the other side of the road. We had the chance to do the right thing, and we deliberately chose not to.

Sure we could come up with legitimate reasons, sound rationale, and pretty words to make us feel better about not getting involved . . . but was that what God wanted? Or was God standing back, waiting for us to step up to the challenge?

Thankfully, Barbara and God didn't give up on us. Some people did respond to help Christopher. I won't name them because that would embarrass them. But I think they had the guts to truly answer "Who is my Neighbor?"

Christopher did get fed. He got stronger. And several weeks ago, through the help of the consulate, he was finally flown back to the United States for treatment.

Does God sometimes call us as to be a village of Good Samaritans? Not just when there are Hurricanes to spur us into action, but also when there is the lonely, confused, suicidal man with no family connections? The person who has no family except for the family of God?

What does it truly mean to be the family of God? A village of Good Samaritans?

How do we live Christ with the people around us?

(Share Burmese story entitled "The Good Samaritan Stone")

Who is my neighbor?

Is the passing traveler who gets robbed my neighbor?

Do I have any reason to get involved, to reverse his ill fortune?

And not only me, but what about my entire community?

And if the solitary thief had been captured, would that exonerate my entire village from taking any action?

The Mayor in our story said no. He holds the entire village accountable for what happened. He draws them into the situation. He pulls the villagers into his outrageous dialogue with the Stone, until they were no longer bystanders. Until he could hold them in contempt, and thus fine them to help repay the man who had been robbed. He showed that what happens to one person, happens to us all.

And that's why I can see a silver lining in every hurricane. Mother Nature doesn't care if we're rich or poor, educated or uneducated, Mexican, American or Canadian. She whips her wind, dumps her rain, causes havoc in everyone's lives.

And as human beings we join hands and help each other as a village of Good Samaritans. We do the right thing. We live out what it means to be the Family of God.

God speaks to us during Hurricane Season. Do you hear what he's saying?

The message is clear, compelling.

It's not way up in heaven.

It's not way across the sea.

It's close.

Very close.

Close,

In our Mouths,

Closer still,

In our Hearts.

Just do it!

Live Christ, Be Christ, with the people around you.

Not only in September.

But in every single month of the year.

Amen.

Sources:

Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Deuteronomy by J.A. Thompson, pages 286-287.

The Good Samaritan Stone from the Lectionary Storybook, by Robert Bela Wilhelm, Fifteenth Sunday, July 15, 2007.