

Who is My Neighbor?
Sermon for Fishers Island UCC
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It is often the case with well-loved and oft-quoted texts that we find ourselves a little *too* at home: familiarity has caused the text to lose some of its edge, an edginess that typified most of Jesus' parables related in the New Testament. While we can't say that Luke's telling of the Parable of the Good Samaritan is the *only* way Jesus ever told it, from what we can tell from studying how Jesus 'performed' his texts before a group, we KNOW that he walked on the edge of what his society could tolerate.

In light of this, our faithful question is: Are WE willing to get out there and find our edge in the words of the Human Rights Messiah, or will we let common assumptions of our time and place blot out the remarkable messages coming to us from the New Testament?

Jewish NT Scholar Amy-Jill Levine, in her new book, *A Misunderstood Jew*, reminds us that the 'Jewishness' of Jesus is an edge often missed in Christian study of the text, and that it is an edge indeed—one we can use to cut open the lies and blindness of powers and principalities. She suggests we make a few topical changes—which I have—to Luke's parable, in order to 'tell it like it is'. This is the time-honored method of 'dynamic analogy'—look for similar patterns today that line up with those in the past as a model for faithful behavior. Let's see what happens if we try it on an Old Standby.

So, here we go with Luke 10:25-37:

Just then an Israeli lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to be part of the international community we hear so much about?" 26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 27 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." 28 And Jesus said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will be in good standing."

Luke 10:29 But wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asked Jesus, "And who *is* my neighbor?"

30 Jesus replied, "A Jewish settler was going down from Nablus to Ramallah on the West Bank, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a rabbi was going down that road; and when he saw the Jewish settler, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a conservative Member of Parliament, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a man from Hamas while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds with his first aid kit. Then he put him in his own jeep, brought him to a safe house near a checkpoint to take care of him. 35 The next day he took out forty lirot, gave them to the disgruntled guards who had nursed the man overnight, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' He did so, and when the settler was well,

they brought him to the check point so he could make his way back to his own people.

36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" **37** The lawyer said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

I suspect this version of our beloved parable sounds a bit jarring; it would be even more so if we were telling it on the West Bank, in Gaza, or in Jerusalem or Haifa. I can't begin to imagine who would be more offended, Jews or Palestinians, with both sides proclaiming, based on their ethnic experiences and expectations, that neither side would ever act this way. No member of Hamas would spare a Jew! Can you imagine what the guards at the safe-house would have said to their compatriot when he showed up with a wounded Jew? On the other side, we might hear the proclamation that no rabbi or government factotum would ever walk away from a Jewish brother! We might even get a cynical comment from both sides that any Jew traveling from Nablus to Ramallah is simply 'asking for it', and neither side could be considered guilty, given their mutual history of torment.

NOW perhaps we begin to intuit that ethical edge that Jesus' parable skews on the road with the events that take place between two known enemy peoples. NOW we get it: nobody at home in West Bank, nor the guards at the safe house, would think that our Good Muslim of Hamas had done a righteous thing. Far from it, given the world as it is! Further, I imagine a series of interrogations being conducted on the poor Jewish survivor once he got back to his own settlement: how many

of them were there (the helpers, not the robbers)? Can you describe the safe house? Do you see any of their faces? How many steps from the safe house to the check point?

I confess that I hope that the Jewish 'neighbor' of the Good Muslim gives no information away, in recognition of the mercy that was shown him when the Good Muslim forced his people to join in this act of mercy. But wise in the murky ways of unending violence, I cannot say what would have happened to the Good Muslim and the Jewish Settler. Would the story have been told over family dinners at night—to dead silence, no doubt? Would it have become one of those great 'exception proves the rule' moments that begin to insert a chink in the armor of hatred? Would the teller of the story have been rushed at the podium, or had shoes thrown her way? Arrest for sedition by either side seems as likely as praise. Let us NOT use the term 'Good Samaritan' as though it is a given that a Samaritan could be good! The incongruity is the point here, and it calls us today to actions incongruous and inconceivable.

Please notice what I am NOT saying by retelling the story this way. I am NOT saying that Jewish settlers are good and Hamas is bad; I am not saying that Hamas is good and Jewish settlers are bad! (I'm not even saying that Hamas is on the West Bank, as they are mostly found in Gaza). This is an analogy and not an allegory; in the latter form of interpretation each element of the original story has a specific correspondence to something in the present or some hidden, arcane meaning of the religious elite. So, I didn't 'fix' the geography and set it all in Gaza; I only had to modernize the main characters. Jesus, you

will notice, 'works' in all times and places, when you read his work from a Human Rights perspective.

Jesus tells his story with stock characters that place the cost and likelihood of ethical action towards one's enemies directly in our face! The Samaritans and Jews were enemies, not tasteful neighbors respecting one another's walls with restraint and good will. We remember our 'regional' New England poet, Robert Frost, when he writes that even though some say 'good fences make good neighbors', at the deepest level of life:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.¹

The poet speaks of Nature's power to destroy human hubris, but I suspect that we could also affirm that the God We Know doesn't love walls, and the interconnectedness of the Earth testifies to that basic theorem. Perhaps one of the true gifts of the internet is that now, almost all of us, are connected to one another in ways we never dreamed—not a voice cries out in the dark but we hear it. Plane crash, celebrity death, election results, banking failures—they travel our digital nets instantly, making our global citizenship more visible than ever.

¹ Robert Frost, *The Mending Wall*

Religious professionals in the mainstream denominations are always wary of 'taking a stand' from the pulpit—whom will we offend? Who will drop their pledge of fiscal support? Will we lose our tax exemption if we speak of the real world? Better to keep it safe and stick with Roman Judea—that is the position we wind up in, all too often. And it IS the way of Worldly Wisdom—don't get involved; it's not our fight.

Or is it?

But I am here to remind us that we live by an Other-Worldly Wisdom, too, one that flows from the dimension of God, and regularly turns our expectations on their heads. Indeed, let us stay in Roman Judea, but let us understand what that means: Jesus still puts a 'weapon for freedom in our very hands', as one HR woman activist from Afghanistan once said to me of the Internet. Without it, she said, the women would all have given up hope during the worst years of the Taliban. Because they knew they were connected, that some of us heard, their courage endured. One might even say they had triumphed outright: swathed in burqas that make every female indistinguishable, they made that prison a source of resistance. Penicillin, birth control, nail polish, and reading primers and many other things, including minicams, came into Afghanistan under those burqas. And the resistance goes on even now: gay Afghanis are taking their revenge on the Taliban. They dance, unsuspected by the authorities, inside the burqas they put on for their protests, even kissing in public while they are dancing with their shrouded partners (you can watch them on YouTube, no less! It must drive the Taliban wild....!)

Dear Friends, do not for a minute believe that the progressive and moderate Muslims of the world do not resist polarizing pressures, every day, or look to believers of every sort for moral support. Are we willing to stick by our parable and open our hearts to the premise of a Good Muslim? Are we as moved by their deaths as we should to be? Will we surge like the powers of Earth in spring to dismantle the fences built between us by cynical governments and manipulative religious leaders? Will we give our dollars to finance proxy servers and cybersquads of students keeping internet sites open in China or Iran or North Korea? Who is our neighbor now?

A recent survey of the Internet traffic around the sham elections in Iran in June shows that many of this planet's human inhabitants have understood intuitively what Jesus taught so long in his parable, set in an occupied country. The image of the resistance to the farce of free elections in Iran is the face of a young girl: go to Facebook, or Twitter or YouTube, and find your neighbors there—they are waiting to find you, too.

I had the privilege to spend the worst days of the violent repression of dissent in Iran after the June elections with members of the Iranian Resistance, and I finally had the experience I had been waiting for during my last decade of work in Human Rights from a religious perspective. Disappeared from the Air France flight manifest due to a change in seats, our Muslim friends spent a frenzied time waiting to learn whether we were on the flight, or if some political issue or worse had kept us from attending. When we finally emerged from customs and immigration, they said, "Oh, Praise Allah! The Christians have arrived!" We were not the only Christians to come, but we were

the only women religious professionals and the only ones willing to be seen and counted among supporters for democracy in Iran—even if it branded us as potential supporters of western colonialism in the minds of fundamentalist Islamists. In such cases, I realized I had become a Good Samaritan: Muslims could look on my actions, and know me for a friend both to them AND to Judaism and all its peoples.

I end these reflections on becoming a Good Samaritan and Jesus' parable with an answer to Jesus' question to the lawyer, 'Who is My Neighbor?'

Her name is Neda and this is her poem:

A Voice Calls: Neda!

The world has eyes in the palm of its hand:
The slaughter of an innocent lamb
Circles the globe with a keening cry:
We have all watched Neda die.
Even more than when a sparrow falls,
We flinch to hear that Voice, that Call:
You are dead, O Neda—but why?

The day was hot, the streets chaos;
Ten thousands sharing democracy's walk.
She left the stopped car just to cool off,
Just for a moment, to catch her breath—
and that was the crime that brought her death.
She died in her music teacher's arms—
O Neda! Tell us why!

They said she was just a passerby
That afternoon when the blazing sky
Shot bullets into the walking crowd.
The screams for Neda grew so loud
The whole world heard.

The whole world cried
To see that angel in the veil
Blossom red, then grow so pale.
She who made such music
Now silenced at the lesson's end,
That Voice not to be heard again...
O Neda!

Her name means "Voice";
Her name means "Call".
Her music lesson taught us all
To sing a grieving song of woe
That blares to violent states a "NO!!"
Neda, we won't let you go:
We hear your Voice; we want to know
Why you had to die.
Beneath the sound of all the screams,
We hear your call and seek your dream
Where music makers walk in peace
Though people gather in the streets,
Carrying ever more signs that read
"Neda! we are all Neda now!
We will prevail, we don't know how,
But we have an angel for our guide
For Neda walks at every side!"

The mosques are silent,
The mourners dispersed,
And everywhere it's just the same:
No one is permitted to say her name,
Or bless her journey, or mourn her loss.
Now every heart must count the cost
For saying,

"My name is Neda."

O Neda!

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be on your
hearts and minds as you answer the questions for yourself: Who is my
neighbor now?