

“The Neighbor Question”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden
for First UMC, Grand Junction, Sunday, August 30, 2020

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ
website: www.fumcgj.org/sermons-2/

Scripture Texts:

Luke 10:25-37 [NLT]

OPENING

I. (*A nod to Anna’s Children’s Message taking the place of the Scripture reading this morning.*)

II. The Tetherball metaphor (*in contrast to volleyball. We’re playing tetherball, not volleyball, in worship. The tetherball pole is a reminder of the anchor we’re using to keep us focused this series: What Jesus envisioned as the Kingdom of God. Politics is involved but is NOT the thrust of the worship series.*)

Let us pray: “May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts...” (Psalm 19:14, paraphrase)

SERMON THOUGHTS

I. Political Categories in the US, Part I (*Part II, Repub’s & Dem’s another time*)

A. Conservatives

1. Definition; Strength(s); Weakness(es)
2. Biblical passage: Jeremiah 6:16

Thus says the LORD:

Stand at the crossroads, and look,
and ask for the ancient paths,
where the good way lies; and walk in it,
and find rest for your souls.

B. Liberals

1. Definition; Strength(s); Weakness(es)
2. Biblical passage: Gal. 3:28

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Talk about liberal! That completely upends the entire religious, economic, and social structure of the time. And what I find amazing is that Paul’s writings, from which this verse came, are the foundation of conservative Christianity today! Go figure!

C. The point is that the family of God is the big tent, under which there is room for all of us – conservative AND liberal – as long as our first priority is “the Kingdom of God and His righteousness” and not the superiority of my viewpoints over yours.

TO THE SCRIPTURES

The Parable of the Good Samaritan:

→ In Luke, it is an oblique question that is asked: “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Not the direct question as in Mark and Matthew: “What is the most important commandment in the Law of Moses?”

- The questioner, “an expert in religious law”, had self-interest in mind – just from the way he asked the question. And his tone was one that was aimed at restricting the most obvious level of meaning in the parable, the reach of “love of neighbor”, not expanding it.
- Another level of meaning: the teaching has to do with how we treat folks who are *different* from us. [Jim Wallis, *Christ in Crisis?* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2019), 25]
- Dealing with “the neighbor question”, yet another angle on interpretation of the parable is that, like the Samaritan, to be a neighbor is to approach others with hospitality and kindness in view. It is not enough to be open to an encounter if someone different from us approaches us. It is about prioritizing reaching out to others who are different from us (Wallis, 26-27).

SERMON THOUGHTS – The Neighbor Question in Contemporary Context: 2 Scenarios

- I. The national attitude toward the stranger, the other: Immigration vs. Xenophobia
 - A. Statue of Liberty quote
 - "Give me your tired, your poor,
 - "Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
 - "The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
 - "Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
 - "I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"
 - B. Deut 5:12-15
 - ^{14b} *On that day no one in your household*

may do any work. This includes you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, your oxen and donkeys and other livestock, and any foreigners living among you. All your male and female servants must rest as you do. ¹⁵ Remember that you were once slaves in Egypt, ...

- C. What about borders? I do not believe that border control and an immigration policy reflective of the Kingdom of God are mutually exclusive. What is being proposed in the Good Samaritan parable is an attitude:
 - toward strangers,
 - toward outsiders,
 - toward those who are “other” – NOT a public policy model.

Jesus leaves it to His followers to do the hard work of policy-making in light of His higher principles.

II. Racism & Hate Crimes

- A. The Debate – Do we have episodic racist events (isolated incidents)? Or do we have systemic (or structural) racism?

One party points to the current societal upheaval and says what we have is a problem of no respect for law and order. The other says the laws are unjust and discriminatory, so the upheaval is not surprising.

Regardless, the Scriptures are plain: Racism has no place in the Kingdom of God. From

- the passage from Deuteronomy I referenced earlier to
- the lesson of the book of Jonah to
- the parable of the Good Samaritan to
- the passage from Galatians I referred to earlier to
- the vision in the book of Revelation of “the multitude too great to count from every nation and tribe and people and language” standing in front of the throne and the Lamb, praising God.
- And you now what that means? We better get used to it – cuz there are gonna be conservatives AND liberals in that “multitude too great to count”!

And you know what I think the great tragedy is? I believe that conservatives AND liberals want the same thing:

Peaceful and prosperous families and communities –

- where the dignity of every human being is honored,
- where children are safe,
- where hard work is rewarded,
- where food is not in short supply,
- where educational and vocational opportunities are available to all
- where health care is accessible to and affordable for all

- where the economy and government work for the benefit of all, and yes,
- where just laws are respected and followed by all and where order, not chaos, is the rule of the day.

I believe the difference between conservatives and liberals isn't in what we aspire to for society; it is in how we go about achieving that.

Extremists on the left and the right would put other values, priorities, and tactics in place of these. But that's a different matter. That's not us... That's not “conservatives”, and it's not “liberals”. And it's not followers of Christ. It's extremists. Speaking of which...(*Portland, OR clash last night*)

CONCLUSION

The Neighbor Question is a religious or spiritual question first, a moral question first and only then a question of policy and politics.

Jesus saw the Kingdom of God as being every bit an earthly enterprise as He did a heavenly one. He did not call His followers to sit idly by and wait to be ushered into the Kingdom of God at their deaths or at the coming of the New Jerusalem. Rather, He called His followers to live by Kingdom principles here and now and, maybe thereby, bring God's Kingdom about on earth.

The opposite, Jesus said, is also true: “Those who live by the sword shall die by the sword.”

Reminder of the Scripture thread, or common verse that winds its way through this whole series:

“...seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”

And CS Lewis’ paraphrase:

“Aim at heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in,’ Aim at earth and you will get neither.”

[CS Lewis as quoted by Peter Wehner of the NY Times:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/25/opinion/sunday/the-political-magic-of-cs-lewis.html>]

Let’s aim at heaven this season, rather than at each other!

Jesus asked His questioner who the neighbor was in His story. Grudgingly, because he couldn’t bring himself to say “the Samaritan”, he said “The one who showed mercy.”

And Jesus said to him – and He says to us – “Go and do likewise.”

Let us hear in our midst the Word of the Lord.

ALL: Thanks be to God.

Song for reflection: “Proof of Your Love”

Benediction:

In the week ahead, let us go out of our way to be neighborly to all, as Jesus would have us to be.