

“Those of Us Who. . .”
Luke 10:29-37
(Who are those who are our neighbors?)

Preached by Carolyn Bohler
Redlands First United Methodist Church
January 25, 2009

A little over twenty-seven years ago when Pope John Paul the Second was just elected as Pope, he came out onto the balcony to greet the thousands of people who had been waiting for him on the Italian square and was very conscious of being the first *Polish* Pope. Of course, his native language was Polish, but on this occasion he spoke mostly in Italian, and at one point, he used this phrase, “Nostra lingua Italiana,” “Our Italian language.” OUR Italian language. Why did he do that?

Obviously, he knew some Italians were skeptical about a Polish Pope. You might say the Pope was smart politically to include himself as “one of them”—one whose language was Italian.

It is fair to say that the Pope was doing something else as well. *He was following in the footsteps of Jesus.* I know that Jesus did not speak Polish or Italian, but Jesus easily blurred fences between people and could imagine people “belonging” to each other in surprising ways. The Pope was declaring that he *belonged* to the Italians as well as to the Polish. That surely was reassuring to Italians. Jesus’ declarations were NOT at all reassuring to *his* listeners. Instead, what Jesus said was extreme and shocking to his hearers.

Similar to many societies, ancient Judaism had many rules about the boundaries between themselves as Jews and others. To appreciate the Jews situation, we need to grasp that it was a RELIGIOUS DUTY to obey these boundaries. A Jew’s *purity*, their standing in their own community, depended upon maintaining the proper “fence.”

Consider now this question posed by the lawyer to Jesus: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answered: “Love God, and your neighbor as yourself.” I guess even in that day lawyers asked “follow-up questions.” This lawyer’s follow-up was: “Who *is* my neighbor?”

The lawyer was and “we” today are the recipient of this parable of Jesus about the man who was walking on the road that leads from Jerusalem to Jericho. For decades I imagined a flat desert road, as I heard this parable. I was wrong. This road which is the setting for Jesus’ parable is a dangerous road that descends 3,300 feet and is 17 miles long. It’s winding, so there are plenty of hiding places for bandits. The man walking along the road in the parable is attacked, beaten, and laid by the side of the road with nothing left on him. His clothes and identification are gone, which is important, for knowing who he is would matter to Jews who passed by, who believed they had to maintain their boundaries in interacting with others. We know the rest of the parable well. A priest sees him, but crosses the road and passes him by. That’s okay for Jesus’ listeners, for they were not priests. A Levite does the same thing. That’s okay, too, for the listeners, for they were not Levites. Given the standard form of a parable, those listening to Jesus would have expected that the *next* person in the parable *would* help, and they would have expected that person to be one *them*, an ordinary Jew! But oh, no! The third

person, who *did* help was a person whom this audience considered unclean, a Samaritan, a descendant of mixed marriages. This human, whom our new President might call a “Mutt,” ended up the good guy in Jesus’ parable—the one who helped.

I ask *you* to consider with which persons you identify the most? When you hear the parable, do you imagine yourself as the one who was walking along the road and was jumped? Or, do you identify with the priest or Levite? Do you think of yourself as the Samaritan who did stop and help? Or, do you kind of feel like the Innkeeper to whom the Samaritan took the man beside the road, who became aware of the crisis after-the-fact, but participated as called upon?

I was a bit surprised that the author of a commentary¹ on this passage *assumed* that we hearers would identify with the traveler. I was not so sure. I had assumed that “we” would connect more with one of the other participants in this hypothetical example.

In fact, probably most of us either have had fleeting fears about our safety or have experienced some kind of assault, so we could imagine being the one who journeys on the road. I imagine, too, that most of us have passed by a needy person. However, I am sure I can accurately declare that most of us *have* stopped and helped someone in need.

Isn’t it true that ALL of these people who walk along or have an establishment along this route are “neighbors”? The point Jesus was making, when asked, was that the person LEAST *expected* to be named the neighbor, the one assumed to be an outcaste, *is* a neighbor whom a follower of Jesus was supposed *to love as much as God and self*. Of course, the Levite and the priest are neighbors. Jesus casts the Samaritan not only as a neighbor, like all the others, but as the best neighbor in this circumstance.

When our family was settled on our street in Dayton, Ohio, we learned that once a year there was a “block party.” Our street was only one block long, so it was easy to define our neighbors on that block, and everyone was invited. Our family brought our potluck dish for the summertime block party for several years. Then “**those of us who**” attended the block party realized we represented only about half of the block, though we had invited everyone. We had put a written invitation at the front door of all the homes. Our block consisted of about 18 families. Most of us on one end of the block were European Americans, and most of us on the other end of the block were African Americans. **Those of us who** came to the block party were all white. We were definitely getting to know each other. It was easy for us white folks to say, “They” are invited, “they” just aren’t coming, but we really wanted to include everyone. So, one summer we asked our *children* to be in charge. Our children succeeded in contacting *all the kids* on the block and made sure *everyone* knew not only about the block party, but that we had plenty of fun races and games. That year the children were in charge “**those of us**” on the *whole* block came out for the block party—and we finally got to know each other! As I’ve heard somewhere, “That was the beginning of beautiful friendships!”

John and I moved to Orange County 5 ½ years ago, into one of the many little communities that share a pool. Not long after we arrived, about 6-8 families around our house informed us that they were having a block party. “Good,” we *sort of* thought. It was the Fourth of July. Then on Labor Day there was another block party. Again, at Halloween, and at Christmastime, yet another block party. In all honesty, I felt like an outsider; all these long-timers held so *many* block parties! It’s hard to avoid a block party that’s held next door. You can’t exactly stay home and not go. If you don’t want to attend, you have to think of something *to do*; then, you’re stuck having to leave. THEY

will all see when you return, so you have to stay away long enough. Though we were invited, this time it was I who didn't really feel "in." Frankly, too, I missed our old friends on the block in Dayton, Ohio. However, *God's nudges are persistent*. One Christmas John and I attended yet another Orange County block party and I noticed a shift had taken place in myself. "They" no longer were having the events. "We" were.

Jesus had an enormous sense of "We." It seems as if he would have been able to feel at home at all block parties. He blurred fences between people and could imagine people "belonging" to each other in surprising ways. He seemed to have no fence whatsoever between himself and others. "Don't fence me in" was his motto, and he seemed to believe that for all others there should be no "in" or "outside."

I have my share of pet peeves. One of my pet peeves relates to preaching. Well, I have a couple preaching pet peeves; one is that I do not like it when a Christian preacher says, "**We**" should give to "**those who** are poor." Or, "**We**" need to invite "**those who are single**" to dinner. Or, "**We**" should help "**those who** have addictions."

I prefer: "**Those of us who** are families of one and **those of us who** have big families sure enrich each other." "**Those of us who** are hungry and **those of us who** don't have room to cram any more in our freezer ought to get together." In other words, I don't like to assume that some category of people is inside our sanctuary walls, while another category is outside. **It is very likely that someone from almost any category we can name is here sometime during the year.**

I recall worshipping in a congregation when a speaker said, "**those of us who** have been in prison" because they *knew* quite well that some of their congregation had been in jail. They had been visiting them there. All congregations ought to say, "**Those of us who** have been in jail," assuming, as Jesus' parable suggests, that any person who is "categorized" in a certain way is potentially present in the neighborhood, or congregation—and in certain circumstances just may be one of the "best" neighbors!

When I preach, I may say, "Those of us who are tall..."; "Those of us who are Texans." I won't speak FOR tall persons or Texans, but I want to acknowledge that people are here who are not like me.

By the way, I am so grateful that Karen Gardner is much taller than I. Because of that people who are clarifying who is who tend to say, "the tall one," or "the short one." If we were not so obviously different in height, I'm afraid people would refer to us as "the older one" and "the younger one."

Remember why Jesus told this parable? He was answering the lawyer who asked how to inherit eternal life. Jesus said we are to love God and neighbors—as we love our self. He was saying, in a sense, "If we place a fence—tangible, emotional, or spiritual—between ourselves and any other person or category of persons, then we've placed a bit of a fence between ourselves and God."

When I lived for a year in Iowa I was flabbergasted that they had no fences whatsoever between their homes. Blocks and blocks of no fences in the housing neighborhoods. In Dayton, our wonderful next-door neighbors did have a fence—a white picket fence, over which many of our soccer and softballs flew.

We can live with *some* physical fences, if we're friendly neighbors. Nevertheless, Jesus' parable about "who is our neighbor" is in accord with poet Robert Frost's poem that says, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." Jesus was fully aware that his hearers held a strong *belief in a righteous boundary*, an interior fence that put them "in"

and all Samaritans “out.” Ancient Jews didn’t erect physical fences; they didn’t need to, for they had the internal fences to keep themselves separate.

I’ve been mulling over the idea that most of *our* strongest “fences” are still on our insides. When our psychological and spiritual fences come down, don’t our physical barriers follow? Jesus’ parable isn’t just a simplistic message about being neighborly; he is trying to get his hearers to change their perception of religious duty. Instead of purity, which meant to them staying fully within their category of Jewishness, Jesus tried to nudge his followers to opt for expansiveness and the realization that there’s a crazy amount of goodness in the ones we tend to see as “other.”

I do not know about eternal life. However, we are guaranteed to have a better life on EARTH if we expand our sense of “neighbor” so that the *only* fence we have includes absolutely everyone.

We are grateful to be accepting new members today. When “**those of us who**” have been attending here a while decide, as I did with my Orange County block-party neighbors, that their pronoun has shifted from “they” to “we,” we tend to want to formally affiliate, to officially “become a member.”

Being a member of Redlands First Church is not fencing ourselves “inside” or walling out others—it is following in the tradition of **Jesus, the extremist-or-sorts, who dared to picture a world in which those who have been considered “they” become, “those of us who. . .”** When we live in this manner, we are living what Martin Luther King Jr. called “The Beloved Community.”

Most of us, when we think of this parable, would summarize it this way: When people are in need, stop and help. So we either feel good or guilty. That’s not Jesus’ emphasis. He wanted to give a gift to the lawyer—and all listeners. He wanted them to SEE the GOOD in those whom they least expected it from!

[Piano starts “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” song now.]

Pope John Paul II helped himself to be accepted, and conveyed his acceptance of those in his audience when he spoke of “our Italian language” to Italians, though of course Polish was his first language. I can easily imagine the adult Mr. Rogers saying “**those of us who** are children. . .” He knew how to speak the language of children, especially in song. He helped children to do exactly what Jesus was trying to get his ancient Jewish hearers to do—to imagine that anyone along their journey may actually be a very good neighbor. Mr. Rogers’ answer to our questions? To view anyone in our neighborhood, whether that’s in Jericho or Redlands with this invitation “. . . Since we’re together we might as well say: Would you be mine? Could you be mine? Won’t you be my neighbor?”

¹ *Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*