

Why Are We Here?

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 16, 1995. Scripture Lessons: Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN

A lawyer asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds with a question of his own. "What is written in the Law? What do you read there?" The Lawyer who is an expert in the Old Testament Law of Moses answers, "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." Jesus agrees. "Do this and you will live."

"But who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asks. Many of God's people thought the word "neighbor" referred only to fellow Jews - members of God's covenant people. They found it hard to believe that when God says "love your neighbor", that their neighbor included gentiles and even hated Samaritans. Samaritans, in the eyes of Jews, were on about the same level as lepers. Jews had no dealings with Samaritans. Samaritans lived to the North of Judea, in the mountains separating Jerusalem in the South from Galilee in the North. Samaritans were descendants of Jews who had intermarried with pagans hundreds of years before. Jews hated Samaritans. Jews demonized Samaritans kind of like we demonize communists or Bosnian Serbs or members of right wing militias.

Jesus, however, taught that the neighbor God commands us to love is the person nearest to us regardless of their beliefs or nationality or religion or sexual orientation or race or political persuasion.

Jesus said that a man was traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho. The road is winding and mountainous and dangerous. Robbers stopped him, beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. A priest and a levite - two religious leaders - passed by the man on the other side of the road. All kinds of explanations have been offered as to why they passed by, ~~on the other side of the road.~~ Maybe they were on their way to religious services of some sort and couldn't afford to be late. Maybe they were on their way to participate in a commission created to study the causes of escalating crime and robbery on the Jericho road. Maybe these two religious leaders feared touching a man who might be dead - that would make them ritually impure - unable to fulfill their religious duties.

After the priest and levite passed by, there came a Samaritan - a hated Samaritan. It's surprising that Jesus makes the hero of his story a despised Samaritan. The levite and the priest didn't love their neighbor, even though he is a fellow Jew. The Samaritan, on the other hand, loves his neighbor - even though his neighbor is his enemy. He obeyed God's law in a thoughtful, even costly way. "He put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him."

So - what must I do to inherit eternal life? That's the question that initiated the story of the Good Samaritan. "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."

Love your neighbor even^{when} your neighbor is your enemy - even when your neighbor is out to get you. Our neighbor is the one closest to us even when that person is our enemy.

Your boss is your neighbor when she invites you into her office and rakes you over the coals. ^{injustice} Your employee is your neighbor when he calls in sick fifteen minutes before he's supposed to begin to work and then takes off to escape the heat at the shore. Your neighbor is your husband who, after 20 years of marriage, takes off with another woman. Your neighbor may be your parent or your child - your husband or your wife. How do you show love to all these people when they're your enemy?

My boys found this newsletter in our yard. WERWOLF. With a picture of Hitler saying, "White people unite!" They read it and brought it to me and said, "Dad, you ought to read this. You're not going to like it." It calls for the torture and extermination of Jews, African-Americans and anyone who isn't a White Aryan. I've never seen such hate literature. I can't find the words to describe the revulsion I feel when I read it. How is it possible to love my neighbor when my neighbor is a White Supremacist?

Dr. Martin Luther King used to say that hate harms the one who hates just as much if not more than the person he or she hates. He used to say that you can't return hate for hate or we become just like those who hate us.

The Good Samaritan, somehow, was able to set aside his reasonable and natural hatred for his wounded enemy and has

become an example to us of what it means to love our neighbor - what it means to have eternal life.

Who are your neighbors? Make a mental list of your neighbors? Make a mental list of those who are closest to you - those with whom you will work and live closely this week. Some of them you may despise. And then ask yourself, "As a Christian - as a follower of Jesus who died in order to save those who stripped him, beat him and left him dead on the cross - as a follower of Jesus and as one who has a desire to share in the very life of God - I'm going to love my neighbor this week beginning today.

Remember, love is not some sentimental feeling of well being toward someone. Love, to some degree, is independent of our feelings. Love often acts in ways which contradict our feelings of hostility. Love is heartfelt and thoughtful obedience to God's Law. God requires his children to love our neighbors even when they're our enemies - especially when they are our enemies.

Let us pray: Almighty God, you have taught us through Christ that love fulfills the law. May we love you with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength, and may we love our neighbor as ourselves; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.