

Today's readings fall within the part of the gospel narrative that contains events, parables and teachings during Jesus' Last Journey to Jerusalem and eventually toward his trial and crucifixion. A few weeks ago, we read about Jesus being rejected by a Samaritan village as he started his journey toward to Jerusalem. The disciples wanted revenge over this rejection. Perhaps the disciples were playing into an ago-old animosity between Jews and Samaritans. Jesus rebuked the disciples for their plans for revenge. At the time of the rejection, Jesus said very little, and continued their journey toward Jerusalem.

As they continued toward Jerusalem, one of the people the disciples and Jesus encountered was a lawyer with questions, (Luke 10:25) "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" and (Luke 10:29) "And who is my neighbor?"

We can see from how the lawyer answered the first question, "what must I do to inherit eternal life," that the lawyer was probably was a regular participant in temple life. For when Jesus asked the lawyer what is written in the law, the lawyer quoted from a part of the Torah known as the Shema, which says "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." (Deut 6:4-5). This is a text that Jewish people for centuries were told to "recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." (Deut 6:7-9)

But the "love your neighbor as yourself" part of the lawyer's answer is a commandment from another part of the Torah, recorded in the book of Leviticus. (Leviticus 19:18) This text says, "you shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD."

The question that the lawyer asked Jesus, "who is my neighbor" was not a casual question, in fact, it is a question that was debated for centuries and is still debated today in Jewish websites. According to one forum, (<http://www.israelforum.com/board/showthread.php?t=12807>) the text in Leviticus implies that the neighbor may be someone who is a fellow Jew, someone defined as "your people." And this is probably how this text had been traditionally translated, until Jesus answered the question for the lawyer.

To answer the lawyer's question, Jesus tells a story with four characters, a man on the road to Jericho, priest, Levite and Samaritan, all characters that would have been familiar to the lawyer.

The lawyer, being a committed observer of the law, would have felt comfortable with the priest, who performed religious duties in the temple. And the lawyer would have felt comfortable with the Levite, who was believed to be a descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses, the scribe of the Torah. Levites often served as assistants to priests before becoming priests. So the lawyer probably also felt comfortable with the Levite. These are two people the lawyer would have easily said were his neighbor.

But the Samaritan? The distance between Judeans and Samaritans was not only measured in miles, but measured in animosity. Judeans and Samaritans did not like each other. This animosity goes back centuries. And as we could see from the Samaritan's reaction to Jesus a few weeks ago, that animosity was still very much alive. Jesus was well aware that Samaritans and Jews did not get along. And Samaritans were definitely not categorized as "your people."

So, in answering the question, who is my neighbor, Jesus turned the question on its head and asked, not who is the lawyer's neighbor, but which of these three, the priest, Levite or the Samaritan, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

The answer to that question, according to the law, would have required an understanding of the ethnicity of the man on the road to Jericho. Jesus' parable does not say who the man on the road to Jericho was, only that he was beaten. So, now, for the lawyer to answer the question, he had to define "neighbor" by some other means than shared cultural values. Jesus' parable illustrates a deeper reading of the law, that being a neighbor is more than just being in close proximity or sharing values or culture. Jesus is now saying that neighbor status is defined by the one who is to be loved as you love yourself.

But we know this, this is one of the most well known stories in the Bible, or so many of you may think, but I am finding that many people under the age of 25 do not know the story of the Good Samaritan. If they don't know this story, it is possible that they don't know the ethics of being kind to others, showing mercy to all, and to all, consider them your neighbor.

While young people today may not know the ethic of the Good Samaritan, many younger people now about the ethic of the television show Survivor. I know many of you might not have watched this show, but the basic premise is a group of people are cloistered and divided into two to four teams. The teams are judged by how well they work together on various tasks. The losing teams are then punished by having to vote for a member of their team who would then be removed from the game. Then, the teams reassemble and a new task is given. The teammates have to work together to complete the tasks. Meaning, they have formed friendships and alliances with people they would eventually have to betray. No longer are they being kind and merciful to each other to show unconditional love. They are using mercy and friendship as a means to an end. To win means to betray. Friendship is a temporary state. Love is a weapon to use against your neighbor.

So, if we applied the Survivor Ethic to the parable of the Good Samaritan, then the man on the road to Jericho would have been simply voted off the island and eventually, the priest, Levite and Samaritan would pretend to be friends as long as there was a common task, then, when it was convenient, they would kill each other.

What kind of society will this leave us with? Will this kind of ethic lead to more isolation? What will this do to the quality of our relationships? Will we want to know our neighbors?

Years ago, I worked in an office with about 12 or 13 people. It was a difficult time of life, my father was quite ill, and I was finding it hard to work under those circumstances. I had asked for additional time to resolve the situation with my father and his pending death, but my job told me that either I come to work or resign. I should have resigned. It was the worst job I have ever experienced, mostly because my situation, suspect I was being sized up as weak. My colleagues were not very honest; all of my weaknesses were exploited. I was set up to fail. I later realized the ethic of the office was more like Survivor. The job ended by a review system where my colleagues passed judgment on my work. Essentially, I was voted off the island and I lost the job.

For a long time, I could not figure out what had happened until the television show Survivor became popular. I realized from that experience that living in a world run by the Survivor ethic meant not eternal life, but inevitable death. The more I thought about this experience, I realize that the opposite of the Survivor ethic is the Good Samaritan ethic. Jesus introduces the Good Samaritan ethic in the context of the lawyer's two questions, How can I obtain eternal life, and who is my neighbor. In many ways, these two questions are connected.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is not only about who is my neighbor, it's about eternal life. This means eternal life not only has to do with loving God, but also with loving one's neighbor.

We are not sure what is eternal life, except we believe that it is through Jesus that we obtain eternal life. But what is eternal life? If anything, eternal life is the absence of time and the absence of death (and the eternal presence of love). In the Survivor ethic, time is used against you, you have finite amount of time before you are voted off the island, or until you vote someone off the island. And being voted off the island is a kind of death.

But the Good Samaritan ethic is one that challenges time and death. Although Jews and Samaritans had been enemies for centuries, an act of kindness between by a Samaritan redefined neighbor for a lawyer. Jesus' story did something that could not be resolved in years of animosity and conflict, that a Jewish person would now define a Samaritan as his neighbor.

So, who is your neighbor? And what ethic would you apply to how you treat your neighbor? What if you are confronted with an opportunity to get ahead, as long as you use the survivor ethic? Will you grab onto temporary glory at the cost of eternal life? Can we still win the game if we are voted off the island? The Good Samaritan ethic says yes you can win, if you're voted off the island, since winning is not defined by the confines of space and time. For the Samaritan lost money and time by helping the man on the road to Jericho. Perhaps the Samaritan lost in this world, but he won a victory that transcended time and conquered death.

Proper 10C (Good Samaritan)
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So, this week, I encourage you to choose life through our actions of loving God with all your heart, soul and mind and transcend time, space, culture and even death by loving your neighbor as yourself.