

DO LIKEWISE

**Sermon delivered by Elder Barbara Wheeler
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church & Hebron United Presbyterian Church Joint Service
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The Presbyterian Church in Rensselaerville, open only in the summer, has a different preacher each week. To create the kind of continuity you in Hebron enjoy by having the same pastor with you, Sunday after Sunday, the Rensselaerville Church's Session chooses a theme for the summer that all the preachers are asked to address. This summer's theme is "And who is my neighbor?"

The first passage that sprung to mind when I was told the theme was the one you just heard, the parable of the Good Samaritan, which people think is the best summary of Jesus' teaching about love of neighbor. When I told my husband I had selected that passage, however, he said, "Good luck. It's been done." So I have decided to hedge my bets with some scripture that hasn't been done very much, Psalm 82, an unusual account of what happens when the Lord Yahweh has a meeting with some other gods:

God has taken his place in the divine council;
in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:

"How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality
to the wicked?"

Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.

Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.

[You] have neither knowledge nor understanding,
[you] walk around in darkness;
all the foundations of the earth are shaken."

I say, "You are gods, children of the Most High,
all of you; nevertheless, you shall die like mortals,
and fall like any prince."

Rise up, O God, judge the earth;
for all the nations belong to you!

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"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."

The most memorable sermon I ever heard on these famous lines was preached not in a church but in a hotel ballroom; not by a minister but by a politician; and not to a congregation like Hebron or Rensselaerville but to a very hostile crowd. The occasion was the National Prayer Breakfast, which despite its inclusive-sounding name is a conservative Christian event organized by and for members of Congress, other officials and their guests—several thousand persons who gather annually at the Washington Hilton. The speaker was President Clinton, not at all popular with most of this audience, some of whom, in the year before, had tried and failed to have him impeached. Clinton's sermon was just two sentences. "We are the most powerful nation in the world," he said, "enjoying the longest period of prosperity in our history. Now the question for religious people like us is: Who is our neighbor, and what does it mean to love him?"

For just a moment, the president had everyone's complete attention. You could tell from the sudden silence that replaced the murmuring that had started when he got up to speak. Like the lawyer in the parable who was testing Jesus and then found himself hearing the scripture he was forced to quote, we all, enemies as well as supporters of the president, knew that the word of God for us had just been spoken: "Who is our neighbor, and what does it mean to love him?"

And then—you could almost hear this—the wheels began to spin in each of our heads. Love your neighbor. Ever since those words first became part of God's word they seem to have tripped off the same process in everyone who hears them: calculation. What's my obligation, I found myself asking, just as the lawyer asked Jesus. Under the terms of this neighbor law, what will eternal life cost me? How much do I—do we as a church and a country—have to love, or more to the point, how little can we love and still get by? And our neighbor, who is that? The word means "near one" in both English and Greek. Who is near enough to count and who is so far away that God can't possibly expect us to care for them?

My guess is that everyone in that ballroom, Republicans and Democrats alike, fell into this age-old pattern, each of us grasping for a limited definition of "love" and "neighbor." The president led the way. His list included struggling middle-class families and friendly foreign countries. He never mentioned the poor or immigrants or countries really close by like Cuba: then as now those were politically unpopular causes. His list and all of our lists were abbreviated for a reason: given how much we owe our neighbors under this commandment—to love them as ourselves, as if they were just like us—it's best not to have too many.

If the problem of neighbor selection was a challenge then, it is logarithmically greater

this year. In today's world, swept by a pandemic and massive social upheaval at the same time, there is no end of human need. Friends and family are fearful or depressed or both. Thousands of our near neighbors and millions in this country are hungry, some are homeless or afraid they soon may be. Essential workers beg for protection so that they can do their important work. Minorities plead for equal treatment. In some other parts of the world, conditions are much worse. Yemen, Lebanon, India—some of the most severe humanitarian crises that aid workers have ever seen. Surely God does not hold us accountable for all of it!

Who are our neighbors, and what does it mean to love them?

When people of faith are faced with hard questions like these, we turn to the Bible. In this case, though, the Bible makes our problem worse. Scripture defines neighbor very broadly. In Leviticus, "love your neighbor" applies not only to fellow Israelites but also foreigners who live in Israel: "Love the alien as yourself," it says, "because you were once an alien." The Samaritan parable raises the stakes still higher. Samaritans and Judean Jews were feuding religious cousins. They generally hated each other. Yet the Samaritan helps his Jewish enemy.

So foreigners are neighbors. Enemies are neighbors. Scriptures that define our obligations to others will not help us pare down our lists. We know this, so "religious people like us," to use the president's effective rhetoric, religious people have a subtle way of coping with the gap between our short lists of neighbors and the long ones scripture requires. Love of neighbor is important, we remind ourselves but it is the second commandment not the first, which tells us to use all our strength to love God. Not our good deeds but our total faith in God comes first. Maybe if we place our whole trust in God and worship God alone, a merciful God may hear and understand our inability to love others as much as ourselves, will forgive our failures, and let us inherit eternal life.

This escape hatch from the neighbor requirement doesn't work either. The unmistakable lesson of that strange Psalm 82 is that there is no love of God, no true faith, apart from love of neighbor. *God has taken his place...in the midst of the gods.* Gods? What is going on here? Don't all Christians and Jews believe in one true God? And yet in this psalm, God stands up in the middle of a council of the gods, a sort of divine united nations. God, (Yahweh) stands up and has a fit, thunders judgment on the other gods: *How long will you go on judging unjustly and showing partiality to the wicked?* For their failures of compassion and justice, Yahweh condemns them: *You...gods ...shall die like mortals.*

Why is this in the Bible? Some think that it's a fossil, a leftover from the time before Israel fully recognized that its God, Yahweh, was not only the best of the Canaanite gods but the only one. I think there is a more plausible reason. The psalm belongs in the Bible because the gods of the nations have not gone away. Their kind of power, to give or withhold the necessities of life, is still wielded today. Who's got it? We do. Those of us gathered in the Hilton ballroom, those of us gathered in this worship service, citizens of what is still the richest and most powerful country in the world, we are the gods of the nations. By our decisions, we

can save, or ruin, the lives of so many people—in our communities, in our country, all over the world.

No doubt the gods had good excuses for ruling unjustly just as we do: the problems of the poor and oppressed are complicated. We don't know how to solve them. Yahweh was unmoved by the gods' claims of impotence. Those who have the resources to make a difference also have the power to do it: *"Give justice to the weak and the orphan, [Yahweh says]...[to] the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked."*

Well then, if we can't make a short list of neighbors or substitute love of God for love of others, how shall we, like the lawyer, inherit eternal life? Here's a hint: As many times as we hear the story of the Good Samaritan, we always forget how it ends. Jesus rejects every attempt to define, and thus limit, the scope of our responsibility for others. Who is the neighbor? Not the man beaten by robbers. The neighbor, Jesus forces the lawyer to admit, is the "the one who shows mercy." We have met the neighbor, and he, she is us. A neighbor is one who has some resources and spends them to relieve misery without counting the cost. Many in our communities, in our country and around the world live in misery. There is no avoiding the lesson here. If we as Christians, if we in this country, want to live the kind of life that lasts, generosity is the way to get it.

Scripture does not provide a foreign aid plan, an immigration policy, a detailed design for social programs at home or even an outline for our church's charitable efforts. But it does tell us what is required for us to live with God and with others. What God wants, what God makes possible by warming our hearts, is open-handed justice for those who have been deprived of their share of rights and their share of the goods of the earth. What we must do to inherit eternal life and what we must do to insure this society's future with integrity is one and the same thing: We must love justice and mercy with everything we have got. As God has come close to us, we must draw near, come close to anyone, any personal or national friend or foe who needs our help.

Who is the neighbor? *The one who shows mercy*, said Jesus. *Now, Jesus said, go and do likewise.*

