

BEYOND WHAT WE KNOW
Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Viki Brooks
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
September 4, 2022

Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Luke 10:25-37

Last Saturday I sat down and read the sermons from this summer that are posted on our web page. Our theme, Loaves and Fishes: The Meaning of Community, lent itself to various approaches to a definition of community. For those of you who were here each Sunday, you heard a sermon on the biblical story of the loaves and fishes from four of our 10 different preachers. They expounded upon the story as it appears in three of the four gospels. As you now know these are remarkably similar accounts.

This summer's reflections on the nature of community involved a variety of approaches and perspectives. Still, I felt sure I could find a few commonalities among the wonderful collection of individuals who offered you their thoughts. Two stood out to me. Most of us addressed physical places of meeting that facilitated the creation of community. Almost all of us attached our understanding of community to the human need around us. It is the latter thought that captured my thoughts for today's sermon.

The story of the Good Samaritan is well known by many. At its core is the question who is my neighbor? Who are the people to whom I relate and offer my care, a chance for conversation and a place at my table? The one asking the question was an "expert on the law". This is of course Jewish law. That said, there is a bit of a Hollywoodesque in this portrayal of the lawyer. Can't you just see the eager and dramatic gesturing of this questioner? Perry Mason or Law and Order-ish?

I knew my eldest son, Nick, was going to be a lawyer long before he did. Any time there was a roadblock to where he wanted to go, or what he wanted to do, he would begin to pose questions. These conversations often started with me saying NO to something. Rather than a simple question of why common to many children, Nick would say something like, if I promise to stay at the dinner table until you are done eating, may I take the booster seat away? Yes, he began this practice at 3.

A good lawyer knows how to craft good questions. Questions that will produce the answer they want to hear. The lawyer in our story this morning is no exception to that generalization. His first question, "What do I need to do to inherit eternal life?", is one of those simple questions with an almost self-evident answer. It is a question that any good Jew would be able to answer and yet Jesus answers the lawyer's question with a question. Jesus asked, What is written in the law? And how do you understand it?

This was a little bit like asking a heart surgeon if she knows where the heart is and what does she know about its functioning. The lawyer answers the rather simplistic question correctly: he quotes the first part of the Shema, a prayer that thrives at the core of Judaism, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind" [c]; and "Love your neighbor as yourself" [d]. He did not need to be an expert in the law to give that answer. Even a Jewish child could have offered a close proximity to these words.

The lawyer wants more. He wants a deeper answer. He wants a specific answer: Who is my neighbor?

Some commentators suggest that the lawyer was acting antagonistically at this point, wanting Jesus to slip up somehow. I'm not so sure. I think the expert might have actually been grappling with the question

honestly. Perhaps, like this congregation's wandering through thoughts on community, he was searching for a description of the neighbor that encompassed more than the limited sphere of what he already knew.

Our scriptural accounts of Jesus offer us a portrait of an exceptional storyteller and our text for today is one of the more masterful of the collection. One of the joys of doing a scriptural analysis of these stories is that my perspective to the same text changes over time. My current dive into the story of the Good Samaritan, took me to an article by Jacob Jervell. Jervell points out that our point of perspective on the parable matters. In other words, the character with whom we identify in the story, draws us to some subtle differences in our conclusion.

Our Sunday school versions of this story invite us to identify with the Samaritan. The good guy. This man does what is righteous and seemingly consistent with the law, even though the Samaritan was from an outcast group operating far away from Jewish norms.

Jervell points out that the lawyer in the story would most likely identify most closely with the man in the ditch. The other actors in this story, the priest and the Levite, had a specific place in the practice of Judaism, but it would not be the same as the place of an expert in Jewish law. Certainly he would not have identified himself with the Samaritan. This collection of people were seen as a hated and heretical lot. In short, each of the passers-by were "other" to the lawyer and to Jesus's listeners. It was the man in the ditch, the beaten, broken, dying, moaning man in the ditch that offers a point of entrance into the story.

If you were in the ditch, needing a life-saving response from another, I am pretty sure you are not going to ask if the helping hand was coming from someone who concurs with your political or religious views. You would be unlikely to ask if they had been vaccinated. You would not ask if your person of deliverance was up to snuff on their purity practices. I think we all would simply accept the kindness with gratitude. At its core, the differences between the one in the ditch and the one offering help were overshadowed by the acknowledgement of human suffering. The common denominator between helper and helped was their humanity. Otherness did not matter in this scenario.

The expert in the law got it right again. The neighbor is the one who had mercy on the beaten man in the ditch. The roles of the other participants in the story were selected to represent specific identities within Judaism. A priest and a Levite would be among those who would be assigned attributes of righteousness and goodness. The Samaritan was distrusted and excluded. But for the man in the ditch, he was looking for action. He wanted the goodness to take the form of the specific action to help him.

I was captured and a little threatened by the title of the meditation offered by my friend and colleague Genghis Khan. His sermon title was "Is Organized Religion Good For Today's Community?". It gave me a great deal to think about. Pretty much his conclusion answered his question in the negative. Organized religion is not good for our communities.

I am not sure that anyone outside of Session would know how lax I am with the organized part of our Presbyterian systems. I will state emphatically that I value many of the aspects of Presbyterian governance. I am equally emphatic that rules that get in the way of spiritual growth or the practice of our faith are not helpful. That does not mean I will ignore those rules, but I will question them...and maybe bend them a little.

There were rules that constrained the response of the Levite and priest in their assistance of the man in the ditch. There were probably circumstances that also influenced their choice to keep walking. Those we can only guess at and I am pretty sure there are numerous times I have raced by someone in need due a scheduling conflict or an imagined apprehension on my part. I think this story, at least in part, was an invitation for Jesus's listeners to examine the role of religious rules in their lives. Sets of rules can and do define communities. In some ways this becomes a positive identity marker and a way of keeping the faithful honest. In some cases they can get in the way of the really important part of loving God first and our neighbor as ourselves.

I have yet to follow up with Genghis, but after reading his thoughts several times, I understand his conclusion even if it is a bit edgy for me, an ordained servant of a religious organization. You see, at our best, our religious and human best, I think the best part of religious communities are the structures and systems that support us. That said, I am not sure we are particularly consistent in functioning at our best, as individuals or as an organization. The harm of organized religion, many cited by Genghis, continues. But, so do the explorations of what it means to be faithful and merciful as an adherent of those organizations. And, within them, whether Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, Wicca or Christianity, there is a shared language and ethos in which to discuss our understanding of ethical or righteous or merciful behavior: We can question, as a shared human enterprise, the laws that places otherness of race, class, religious beliefs above our common humanity.

As we welcome new members to this community of Rensselaerville Presbyterian church, where our religion is pretty loosely organized, it is my fervent prayer that you will find a place where the exercise of your questions is integral to your experience. Good questions have the ability to birth better religious practice. Your choice to identify with us, as a community member or affiliate, is a gift! I hope that the structures and supports you find in our midst are assets to your growth.

I want to touch briefly on the other area of concurrence I observed in our series of preachers. Most identified a physical location of community. I won't rehash them, they are on the church website if you want to revisit them. I want to hold up one image that I think could be an actionable idea for experiences of community outside of the summer months that we share together. In her reflections, Dardis McNamee suggested that community requires a *Stammtisch*, a common table, where people come together without an invitation. One of those low-threshold meeting places, where our shared life can unfold. She commented that many of the gathering places in this village have closed. Is there a way to resurrect the experience of these conversation points? These tables at which questions are explored and community is experienced? I think there is a great deal to be gained by such an exchange, especially if there is an intentional emphasis on the common denominators of our human need and our interdependence.

One of the things I treasure most about the work we are doing together as a church is our value for hospitality and belonging. I appreciate the intellectual curiosity that fuels some wonderful conversations with your preachers at the lunches you host. Curiosity is an excellent starting point for good questions.

Oh, as a post note, that three-year-old questioner I mentioned now serves as an assistant district attorney in Schenectady County. While I have never seen him in action in that role, some of my work colleagues have while serving on various juries. It appears that Nick is still quite good at forming questions in order to receive the answers he needs. I guess all that negotiation early in life has served him well.