



El Árbol de Vida

Sunday, July 10, 2022
The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Mark Mares

Psalm 82
Luke 10:25-37

A few weeks back now I traveled. I had the great privilege of traveling with a group of our youth to the Mexico, Arizona border for an immersion trip. Now, this wasn't a typical youth mission trip that you might be familiar with. This was the type of trip that was centered more around learning, cultural immersion, building relationships, seeking questions, and wondering together. We made over 150 tamales for the Migrant Resource Center, a place that seeks to be a place of shelter and welcome to whoever walks through its doors.

But much of our time was spent hearing stories, stories filled with joy and deep pain, longing, hope, and despair. There were human stories.

We stayed for the week in Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico. Each morning, we began our day around a table for breakfast with devotions filled with singing, reflections, and prayer. And then we would travel and meet with individuals and organizations and ministry partners that were doing all sorts of work in the fronteras, borderlands.

And our texts during our devotional, one of our texts happened to be the one that we just heard this morning from Luke's Gospel. It's a story that we know well. Jesus has a conversation with a man who knows the law and seeks clarity about how to inherit eternal life. But Jesus knows this man knows the answer. So Jesus, of course, flips the question back at the man. And the lawyer is quick to respond. He knows the law. He knows it deep in his very being: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind, and all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself. That was it, Jesus tells him, do that and you'll find life.

The Jewish Rabbi Joseph Telushkin remarks that this is the bottom line requirement that God makes of Jews. Rabbi Telushkin tells the story of a conversation between a would-be convert and Hillel, the greatest rabbi of his age. The would-be convert asked Hillel to summarize Judaism briefly, and Hillel responded with perhaps a more pragmatic version of the biblical verse. What is hateful unto you, don't do unto your neighbor. The rest is commentary. Now go and study.

The lawyer isn't satisfied with Jesus response. He presses further and asks Jesus, "but and who is my neighbor?" Jesus here responds, as he often does, with a story. The story we know is the parable of the Good Samaritan, which, to be honest, I don't love that we call it the Good Samaritan because in many ways it implies that all Samaritans are bad, and this one happens to be good. Maybe a better name would be the Good Neighbor. But I don't want to erase the agency of Samaritan, so perhaps it just deserves an asterisk. Either way, we know this story of a man attacked by robbers lying on the road in need of help.

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Several individuals see this person. Some cross to the other side. Others act as if they don't see him. But this one individual, a Samaritan, sees the hurting man and draws near to him. He walks toward him, helps him, brings him healing, and tries to do everything he can to help him recover.

Which of these was the neighbor? Jesus says. The one who showed him mercy.

What's interesting about this story is that the lawyer is doing what we as a society often do. We label things to the maximum so that we don't have to fully commit to the things, or people, that don't match our labels. If this person isn't really my neighbor, then I don't have to help her when she's in need. The lawyer is really asking, when he asks who is my neighbor, is who is not my neighbor, where are the limits? You see, defining the neighbor inevitably leads to a narrow focus. This one, not that one. Jews, not Samaritans. Judeans, not Galileans. Protestants, not Catholics. Democrats, not Republicans.

Now, don't get me wrong, labels can be good, especially when they're used to create safe space for folks who are powerless and marginalized. But labels can become dangerous when they're used to create strangers, or division, or hierarchies. Yet loving people who are different, who are strangers, is biblical. In Leviticus, the call to love our neighbors as ourselves is expanded to show outward love towards strangers and aliens. And during Jesus' ministry, he expands this to even include our enemies. No one is left out of this call to love our neighbor.

The lawyer's first response about loving God and loving neighbor as oneself – It's correct. But it is only just, when it comes together with love and care for the neighbor.

We see this throughout Luke's Gospel, where Luke correlates a devotion to God with actions that represent God's love and mercy towards others. In Psalm 82, which we heard just a little while ago, also affirms that God's justice requires doing righteousness, especially towards the vulnerable. Neighbors and enemies alike. The lawyer, however, doesn't seek justice. Rather, he seeks to justify himself. Now, for some context, Samaritans and Jews have had a long, deeply intertwined, often hostile history. And focused on such questions as; "Whose temple was god's true dwelling place?" The Samaritan in this story is also a stranger, perhaps even an enemy. Yet he is the one who shows boundless and relentless care.

Now, we know, and at least I know I know, that it's definitely easier to narrow our definition of who our neighbor is. We might even think it's safer to extend our care and hospitality to a certain select group of individuals. But as the Samaritan shows, the Samaritan is the real stranger, both in status and ethnicity. And yet he was the one who acted as a neighbor. He was the one who acted out of care, love, and mercy.

The parables are supposed to disrupt us, perhaps make us even a little uncomfortable. So a question that I sit with is: who are the neighbors in our midst? Who are the strangers that make us uncomfortable?

I can't get Agua Prieta out of my mind. The people. The beauty. The joy. The struggle. The community. There's been much to process. One day during our trip, we traveled to visit an organization called CATPSIC. It's a drug rehabilitation center. We got to hear stories and testimonies of the community they've built there. A community that supports whoever walks through the doors. They work together. There's medical support, therapy, food, a bed for all. Whoever you are, if you come and knock on their door, they will open it and welcome you there. And you can stay there for as long as you need to get to the place that you need to be at.

After touring the facility and hearing the stories, our group got into a van, and some members from the community got into a truck, and they lead us into the desert. That day after our visit, we planned to hike through the desert on a trail that migrants might travel on as they seek to cross the border. And even though we had a mild day in terms of the weather, it was 94 degrees that morning and the sun was unrelenting. Along the walk, we encountered many things left behind or abandoned: a harness that had been discarded, several empty bottles of water, a toy, a blanket, a jacket, a child's boot. The journey a migrant might take can be harrowing – days and days in the desert without water, shelter or food. Just getting to the border is only part of the journey.

A few years back, there were ranchers in the United States' side of the border reporting that they had found bodies of individuals who had died on their property from heat exhaustion or dehydration and other causes from the heat. Different organizations work with them to put huge jugs of water on their property so that those making the journey had water when they needed. But in that area all of those jugs have been either stolen or vandalized.

But that day, our journey in the desert started and ended at a place called el Árbol de Vida – the tree of life. It's a huge almond tree and it not only provides shade from the unrelenting sun, but there's a huge barrel of water here. It's a place of refuge and restoration for migrants who are journeying to cross the border. And the folks from CATPSIC are the ones who work to make sure that it's always full of water.

Now, I don't want to get into the policy conversation, but one thing I can say is that the border system is beyond broken. It's certainly doing what it was designed to do, and it's a bipartisan initiative. It's designed to keep people out, and people have always died because of it. Just last week word spread of news of a tragedy – 53 people found dead in a tractor trailer in the headline read: *Migrant Tragedy*. But these weren't just bodies or migrants. They were sisters, friends, lovers, sons and daughters who said goodbye to a parent or who were hoping to reunite with one. They were, and are, our neighbors.

In the Star Wars novel *Master and Apprentice*, Obi Wan Kenobi remembers a conversation between him and Qui-Gon Jinn. And this is what Qui-Gon Jinn says. “If our beliefs tell us one thing and the needs of real people tell us another, can there be any question of which we should listen to?” Who are our neighbors?

We finished our hike and returned to el Arbor de Vita. We broke bread with all of the folks from CATPSIC who made the journey with us. There was so much food, all sorts of different burritos, chips, veggies, dips. There was plenty of water and juice for us, and a lot of fruit with limes to squeeze on top and tajin to pour on top. In that place, our kids from Ann Arbor were sharing a meal and being served with this group of folks who were on their own journey of healing and restoration. We were once strangers, but there we became friends and neighbors. It was a fitting end to our hike because tables and meals together are so important.

I love that patristic interpreters make a special note when they're in looking over this passage. They note that the Samaritan heals the wounds of the man on the road with oil and wine. In the Samaritan they recognize Jesus, the Great Physician, who has come to heal us. Jesus is there to anoint those who are newly baptized and washed in the waters of life. And Jesus is there standing with a cup, a cup of salvation and blessing for all who thirst. Jesus, the Great Physician, coming to meet us wherever we are, in our wounded-ness, our brokenness, our hurting and our longing. It's in those ordinary elements of the table and water where Christ promises to meet us in an unlikely way, transforming us into willing neighbors and a different kind of people.

The noisiness and chaos of this world, with the label making fear mongering and binary making machines, may we choose wonder, and curiosity instead. And friends, may we be moved with compassion, moving towards our neighbors, whoever they may be, recognizing the human dignity in all people as we seek justice in our world.

And may we be open, ourselves to receive the love and compassion from whoever it may come from.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.