

“A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood”

Luke 17:11-19; Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might acknowledge our deep need for your reconciling love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

The word “neighbor” is not actually in either of our scripture lessons today, and yet, both of these passages got me thinking about what they teach us about being good neighbors. The most famous biblical passage about neighbors, of course, is when Jesus tells us to – what? – “love our neighbors as ourselves.” There is a lot packed into that compact commandment, most of which we won’t get into today. But there’s another connection between that teaching and today’s readings, because, as you’ll remember, when Jesus affirmed this Second Commandment, he was then asked “who is my neighbor?” and who was central to the story Jesus answered that question with? The Good Samaritan, of course. Well, one good Samaritan. Today’s story from Luke features another good Samaritan. Are you sensing a theme?

Let’s look, for a moment, at the communities involved in this story from Luke 17. The writer makes clear from his geographic setting that it’s not particularly surprising that Samaritans would be around. Jesus was “going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.” So the crosscultural nature of the story isn’t that unusual, although there would still be an assumption that the various religious/ethnic

groups would be keeping to themselves. But let's notice the other, unnamed community that's present before this story even begins: the community of lepers. That's where the cultural barriers are breached, presumably because the stigma and burdens of leprosy outweighed the minor cultural differences between the Jews and the Samaritans. When you're a leper, all other identity markers pale in comparison. So if a famous teacher from either tradition came by, if there was any chance of healing, it probably didn't matter which background you came from, you were going to plead for healing.

And indeed they did. And Jesus responded. Ten pleaded for healing; ten were healed. One returned to praise God and give thanks. That one was Samaritan. Now, clearly, this person's identity hadn't been completely subsumed by his leprosy, or Jesus might not have even realized the one who returned to give thanks was a Samaritan. Something still distinguished him. And we need to wonder: was it his experience of being accepted into the leper community, despite being an "outsider," that made him less likely to take things for granted – that is, more likely to turn back to thank Jesus for his healing? It seems possible, doesn't it?

There's so much we don't know about this story. Did he say anything to the other lepers before he turned around? Did they notice him go, and intentionally choose not to go back with him? Were they any less grateful, or were they just following Jesus' instructions to go show themselves to the priests? Being part of that

religious tradition, unlike the Samaritan, is it possible they were less trusting of their healing until it had been “certified” by the authorities? Did the Samaritan’s “outsider” status make his experience of leprosy more about relationship than rules, thus motivating him more to thank Jesus than to seek official re-entry into the community? How would the priests have responded to a Samaritan coming to them anyway? Maybe he knew it would just be another experience of exclusion.

But isn’t that maybe the point? On the surface, it seems like Jesus is offering us a lesson about the importance of gratitude. But what if the story is more importantly about what we can learn by living in multicultural community? Jesus is asking us to notice how we can learn to live out our own faith better by witnessing the practices of those around us whose faith is different than ours. Especially when we are members of the dominant culture, we can be better Christians if we learn from those on the margins, those who can’t take anything for granted, those who are constantly aware of the help they have received from others. We actually have an opportunity to do this next weekend, when the Islamic Center of San Diego is holding its annual “Open Mosque Day.” They will be offering tours, presentations, crafts, refreshments, and more. We’re all invited to come by, between 2 and 5 next Sunday. Let me know if you’re interested, and maybe we can go together.

The lessons we can learn from shifting perspectives on neighborliness are present in our passage from Jeremiah too. This one is a little harder to wrap our

minds around, I think, given that we are not really people “living in exile.” “Exile” isn’t a concept we often even think about as something relevant to our modern times. And yet, there are people within our own community who are living here in exile, whether from Cuba or Iran or Russia or many other places. If we were to situate ourselves in these verses from Jeremiah 29, we need to recognize that we are “the city,” not the people being directly addressed who now live in the city with us. And what these verses invite us to consider is what our assumptions are about the refugees and asylum seekers in our midst, those who are in exile all around us. Do we assume that they are just living here temporarily? Do we assume their loyalties are elsewhere, that they see San Diego as merely a pit stop?

The history of immigration in this country is complicated. So often, we see each new generation of immigrants – from wherever – form tight-knit communities in particular areas of town, with shops that carry their special foods from home, clothes shops with garments that are familiar, funeral homes catering to their particular traditions, places where they can assume they can speak their native language rather than struggling through the English they are still learning. What we often fail to realize is that these cultural enclaves are as much about the forces of exclusion from our dominant culture as they are about immigrants from a particular place wanting to only be with one another. What we often don’t see are the hours spent struggling to master this mixed-up language we take for granted, the effort put

into helping one another navigate societal systems that work differently than they're used to, the often deep desire to bring benefit to their adopted home.

Do we assume that immigrants in our midst are “seeking the welfare of the city” where they've landed? Or do we make less charitable assumptions about their motives? When they marry within their community, do we assume that means they're insular? When they marry outside the community, do we think they're trying to erase other cultures? What could we learn from immigrant communities, if we behaved as though all of us are seeking the welfare of our whole community, because we've acknowledged that our welfare is inextricably tied together?

The truth is we have better, stronger, more vibrant communities when we have neighbors who aren't all the same. When we live beside people whose backgrounds and histories differ from ours, we have more opportunities to learn about the world. When we assume the best about each other, community flourishes. You might even argue that is part of loving our neighbors, including and especially the Samaritans! We are blessed, here in San Diego, to have so many opportunities to do this. Just this morning, there was a feature in the Union-Tribune about the San Diego Serbian Festival held at St. George Serbian Orthodox Church in Bay Park yesterday. It made me sad I didn't go. Music, dancing, glass mosaic murals, homemade sausages, biscuits, and desserts – what's not to love? I think I might even be grown-up enough now to try stuffed cabbage!

Maybe neighborliness is a lesson about gratitude. If we can approach differences with appreciation – appreciation for what we can learn, for new experiences we are offered, for someone’s willingness to share their life with us – rather than trepidation, we will be better neighbors. We will be more interesting people and more faithful followers of Jesus. If we can recognize our common humanity with the humility of lepers, we can let all those other barriers that divide us fall away. If we stop taking for granted our advantages and privileges, and focus on being thankful that we all get to live on this wonderful planet, in this beautiful neighborhood together, we can help heal the world.

At some level, God’s vision for our world is like a vibrant, diverse neighborhood. In these days when forces are working to divide us from our neighbors, we must keep this vision alive, celebrating our differences for the richness they bring to our lives. We need to eat together, laugh together, sing together. Mister Rogers used to sing “It’s a beautiful day in this neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor. Would you be mine? Could you be mine?” But then the second verse gets even sillier, reminding us to have fun together: “It’s a neighborly day in this beauty wood, a neighborly day for a beauty, Would you be mine? Could you be mine?” Let’s re-commit ourselves to loving our neighbors: lepers, Samaritans, Muslims, Serbian-Americans, the church upstairs, our Welcome Saturday friends, our 12-step groups, immigrants and exiles from all over. Let’s help Jesus heal the world! H&A!