

“You’re Asking the Wrong Question, Counselor”

Neil Engle
July 15, 2007
Text: Luke 10:25-37

First Christian Church
115 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, Kansas 66502

Do you ever get frustrated when you ask someone a direct question, and they won’t give you a direct answer? They may avoid the question, they may walk all the way around the question, they may even answer a question you didn’t ask, or they may answer the question with their own question, but they won’t give you a straight answer to your original inquiry. Haven’t we all had that happen to us?

I think if we’re honest with Scripture, we must admit that Jesus did His share of avoiding direct answers to some questions. I don’t mean to suggest that He didn’t have a good reason to do so, but more than once did He answer a question with a question or by telling a story. He does that very thing in today’s gospel reading. Jesus encounters a lawyer and is asked by this man – who’s been trained in the details of the Jewish law – what must he do to inherit eternal life. Jesus responds by putting the question to him, “What is written in the law?” The lawyer answers with a recitation of the commandment to love God and neighbor. When Jesus approves his answer and further says, “Do this, and you will live,” the lawyer tests Jesus’ knowledge of the law by pressing further. He asks, “Who is my neighbor?”

Now it wasn’t unusual to test the ability of a teacher by putting such questions before him. Nor was the question of mere academic interest. At the time of Jesus, many Gentiles had come into Palestine. There was a real question whether the obligations to a neighbor extended to those Romans, Syrians, and Greeks. Many Jews concluded that obligations to neighbors included only other natural Jews or those fully converted to Judaism. Some Pharisees excluded as neighbors those who lived in the towns or rural areas and thus could not learn or keep the full demands of the Law. Quite frequently, individuals excluded their personal enemies from the ranks of those who had claim upon them as neighbor. This Pharisaic lawyer was calculating the limits of the circle to whom he owed love comparable to his love for God and for self. Jesus of course, doesn’t answer the “Who Is My Neighbor” question. Instead, Jesus tells a story.

Why is this parable such a favorite? Why has this parable, only recorded in the Gospel of Luke, captured the imaginations of children and adults? Of painters and poets? Why do we love this story about the Samaritan who is never really called “good”?

As one scholar suggests, many a preacher has tried to recreate the parable of the Good Samaritan by simply retelling the story and putting into the role of the Samaritan any person who represents the outcast, the group who is to be shunned or avoided at all costs. And it’s not a bad idea for us as a congregation to think intentionally about those who are excluded from welcome and acceptance in the church. Yet sermons like that often fail miserably, because there is no way to recreate for listeners the shock and surprise that the first hearers of the parable might have felt. We see on television – especially on the Court TV channel – programs such as the World’s Most Shocking Videos, or the Most Shocking Police Shoot Outs, the Most Shocking Car Chases.

Well, friends, the shock value of those programs wouldn’t hold a candle to the stunned response of those Jews who heard about a Samaritan who acted human. There was deep and historic hatred between the Jews and Samaritans. The Jews despised the Samaritans because they had mixed with the heathens who had come into their land. They didn’t strictly observe the religion of Israel. The hatred was so deep that Jews cursed Samaritans publicly in their synagogues and prayed that God would allow them no share in eternal life. The faithful Jews would have no contact with the Samaritans or with anything which the Samaritans had made. The Samaritans had an equally intense hatred of the Jews.

So this would be the World’s Most Shocking Act of Compassion – the closest thing I could compare it to would be if someone who had lost a family member on September 11 stopped in the road to help Osama bin Laden. Or what about a member of al-Qaida giving assistance to an American?

Do you get the picture? Anyone hearing this story would have been absolutely stunned. Jesus sidestepped the man’s question about who is my neighbor and told this shocking story. But He sidestepped their question for a very good reason. He did so because “Who is my neighbor?” is not the primary question. It wasn’t then and it isn’t now, and how many preachers are using this text this morning to preach on “Who is my neighbor?” Anyone who knew of Jesus’ ministry knew that every single person was a neighbor in the eyes of Jesus. It was so obvious that he didn’t want to focus attention on “Who is my neighbor?” or “Who is an appropriate object of my neighborly love?” The whole world is a neighborhood. Any label or group you could

come up with – they’re all neighbors. Unwrap the package – neighbor inside neighborhood is a given. Jesus ministered in the light of that affirmation.

What Jesus saw of primary importance here was not who is my neighbor but rather how do I treat my neighbor? The true bestower of neighborly love in this parable is the one who shared love and compassion – that’s what’s important – not who we treat as our neighbors – but how do we treat our neighbors.

Love of neighbor and love of God is what Jesus is talking about here. Jesus isn’t interested in universal, theoretical, or poetical love. For Him, love doesn’t consist primarily in words, sentiments, or feelings. For Him love means primarily the great, courageous deed. He wants practical and therefore concrete love. Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian*:

According to Jesus, love is not simply love of humanity but essential love of neighbor. It is a love not of humanity in general, of someone remote, with whom we are not personally involved, but quite concretely of one’s immediate neighbor.

Love of God is proved in love of neighbor and in fact love of neighbor is the exact yardstick of love of God.

Then Kung nails us to the wall when He says, “I love God only as much as I love neighbor.” “I love God only as much as I love neighbor.” Does that thought comfort you? Challenge you? Convict you? We love God only as much as we love neighbor. We can talk all day long about how much we love God, but if we’re not putting into action by loving our neighbors, which, if it’s just words – that’s all it is. Frederick Buchner says:

In the Christian sense, love is not primarily an emotion but an act of the will. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, he is not telling us to love them in the sense of responding to them with a cozy emotional feeling. You can as well produce a cozy emotional feeling on demand as you can a yawn or a sneeze. On the contrary, he is telling us to love our neighbors in the sense of being willing to work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our own well-being to that end.

We all know what it’s like to walk on by – most of us know what it’s like to stop and help. Many of us know of being there in need – car accident, tragedy and the remarkable experience of being helped and how much that means.

Two monks were walking back to their monastery in freezing cold. As they crossed a bridge, the two monks hear a man calling for help in the ravine below. They want to stop, but know they must reach the monastery before sunset or they will freeze to death.

The first monk chooses to risk the danger of the cold in order to help another to safety. He climbs down into the ravine and gathers the wounded man into his arms, and slowly makes his way back to the monastery.

The second monk has already gone on ahead, determined to get back safely before sunset.

Night comes, and with it, the bitter cold.

As the first monk nears the monastery, he stumbles over something in the middle of the road. To his sorrow it is the body of his brother who had gone on alone and had frozen to death. In seeking to save his life, he had lost it.

But the compassionate monk, willing to lose his life, was kept warm by the heat exchanged from carrying the stranger in need.

You know, the lawyer who asked Jesus all those questions didn’t need more information. What he needed was to act on his own understanding.

Well, we’ve got all the information we need, so —