

**What if I can't love all my neighbors?**  
**The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**July 10, 2022**  
**The Rev. Katherine M. Bush**

The problem isn't the lawyer. Really, I have to say that because I'm the daughter of a lawyer and the wife of a lawyer and was close enough to going to law school instead of seminary that I took the LSAT. But you can still trust me on this, it's true that the problem isn't the lawyer who was in his time more a scholar of the law than a litigious-type, though this one does seem ready to pick a fight.

And the problem isn't the law. It's unhelpful to denigrate the law as given in Hebrew Scriptures as irrelevant. Jesus says elsewhere in the Gospels that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. And even if we might find loopholes for shellfish, the particular laws that the legal scholar cites are the most life-giving, "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 you neighbor as yourself."

To me, the problem is a problem of scale, of the contrast between the size of our minds and the imagination of God. The lawyer is trying to crack the code on eternal life, and that's just too far above his pay grade. Eternal life is in the category of mystery, and judgment about inheriting eternal life is not really ours to guess at. And more significantly, focusing on grand eventualities means that he skips over the part of living that is within his grasp. As the prophet Johnny Cash reminds us, we can be "so heavenly minded, that we're no earthly good."

There is certainly a problematic self-serving justification in the man's question about who *\*exactly\** his neighbors might be, but maybe there's also some recognition on his part about this issue of scale. Jesus, I can't love everyone, I can't, so could you help me narrow it down? Maybe you could just give me permission to leave some people off the list because loving everyone is too much - whether that's because they're my enemies or maybe just because they're too far away. And Jesus is willing to have this conversation. Helpfully, Jesus redirects him not with sweeping generalizations or vague pronouncements, but with his preferred mode of communication: story-telling. We need stories to bring abstract concepts and ideas into focus, and Jesus gets us.

So, there's a good chance you know this story whether or not you've been in church for any length of time. A man who falls into the hands of robbers, two supposedly upright helper clergy-types pass him by, and someone we're meant to know is a maligned and hated enemy-type stops to help, and then goes beyond the call to make sure all the suffering man's needs are met. Stories help, and one of the ways they help is that they allow us to take away different messages at different times. So, someday, a huge part of the story is that their cultural bad guy becomes their good guy. Other times, the take-home is about seeing through false pieties. Or it could be about going a few extra steps so that your help really helps. In addition to the plot twists of character and the extraordinary generosity of the Samaritan, I heard a new piece of the story today. Jesus' story adds another way to answer the question about which neighbor we're supposed to love: it's the one in front of you and me. On top of messages about creed, and animosity, and dangerous parts of town, we hear a message about proximity - and yes, scale.

I can't love everyone. I can't save all the beaten-up travelers. I can't singlehandedly change the crime statistics for the road to Jericho. I can't fix the inequities in transportation. I can only afford to help with one person's rental assistance. I get where the lawyer is coming from, as I said a few weeks ago in a blog - it's a lot. The problem is that the problems are legion, to borrow a word from another story. So, I can appreciate where our lawyer friend is coming from. When I look around at the neighborhood - I know that it stretches out past the horizon and is filled with heartbreak and tragedy. I can't possibly show mercy to everyone, Jesus.

And Jesus says, I know. I know the size of your heart, and of your soul, and of your strength, and of your mind. I know you can't do it all, but here's the thing. You can do something. You can help this guy right in front of you, even if he's not your kind or your kin. You can learn through the actions of others, even "other" others, how to show mercy and to change, if not the world, then the world of the person right in front of you.

Howard Zinn was an American historian, playwright, philosopher, socialist thinker, and World War II veteran. He has something to say to the lawyer and to me and maybe to you. "TO BE HOPEFUL in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory."

Jesus tells us a story about love right-sized for our small hearts and souls and strengths and minds. He is asking us to expand our ideas of neighbor beyond tribe or ability to repay. He is asking us not to love everyone - that's God's scale, but he is demanding that we love anyone. He's asking the lawyer and you and me to see that anyone can be a neighbor, and there are people we can help and things we can do on our own scale, at our capacity levels: compassionate, even sacrificial, mercies, courageous acts, and everyday kindnesses. To make the simple choice to walk toward the need and not away from it.

"And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future." We don't have to fret about eternal life, nor even about every possible neighbor everywhere. But this isn't to let you or me or the lawyer off the hook, no, on the contrary, we're more on the hook than ever. Recalling the actions of that despised yet good Samaritan who behaved "magnificently" and so many others, and to "live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory." Maybe the victory of eternal life, but that's not really the win, rather it's the victory of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. Or as some churchy-types might say, of living in this world like citizens of the kingdom of God.