

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, September 2, 2007
Rev. John Tapscott

“WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?”

Luke 10:36-38

The lawyer's began his conversation with Jesus by asking, “Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?” This is a most significant question. It expresses the deepest longing of the human heart. It is the question which every religion seeks to answer. And as he often did Jesus turned the question back to the questioner, “What is written in the law? How do you read?” The lawyer answered, “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 your neighbour as yourself.” “Correct,” said Jesus, “do this, and you will live.”

Now don't you think the lawyer should have pressed the pause button right there? Personally, I find it difficult to love God with even a small portion of my being. But Jesus says gaining eternal life requires loving God with all one's being. And if this is what it takes, I know I'm going to fall way short. I sure hope there's another way. Well, the lawyer apparently figured that loving God with his whole being was something he could do. But perhaps some doubts were creeping into his mind. Perhaps he could pass the test of loving his neighbour, too, but he needed to know who his neighbour was - yes, fellow Jews, even the difficult ones, but what about half-breed Samaritans, or occupying Roman soldiers? As long as the definition of neighbour didn't stretch too far, he could justify himself before God. He could do this and live.

Do you ever wonder who your neighbour is, at least from the perspective of whom we are to love as Christ followers? This question may cross our minds when often it seems that all we share with our next-door neighbour is a fence. Who is my neighbour?

During a sermon one pastor quoted the Scripture, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” To emphasize the point, he asked three times, “Who is my neighbour? Who is my neighbour? Who is my neighbour?” Each time a young boy in the congregation answered quietly, “Mister Rogers! Mister Rogers! Mr. Rogers!” That answer actually reflects how Jesus answered the question. For Mr. Rogers became a comforting neighbour to millions of children over the years through his television program.

So “who is my neighbour?” Well, Jesus used a story to answer that question and in doing so actually gave an unexpected answer to the question. So for a moment let's jump ahead

to how Jesus' story ends. Jesus said, "Which one, do you think, proved neighbour to the man who fell among robbers? The lawyer answered, "The one who showed mercy on him." Do we see it? The neighbour is not the one whom we are to love; the neighbour is the one who loves us; the one who shows mercy on us. We can go even deeper and see that Jesus Christ is our neighbour who shows mercy on us.

You know the story. A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. The road was steep and dangerous, with many hiding places in the rocky crevices. It was unwise to travel alone. Not surprisingly, he fell among robbers, who stripped and beat him, leaving him half-dead. A priest came along and passed by. So too did a Levite. But a Samaritan came along, saw the beaten man, and had compassion on him. He bound up his wounds with oil and wine, set him on his own beast, and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. The next day he gave money to the innkeeper. "Take care of him, and if you spend more, I will repay you when I come back." Now the Samaritan was the one least expected to show mercy, at least from the lawyer's perspective. To us, it would be like hearing of a member of the Taliban rushing to help injured Canadian soldiers, or a squeegee kid coming to help you to change a flat tire on the Lakeshore, or quarterback Michael Vick providing a good home for a stray dog. But the lawyer had to conclude that the unexpected one, the Samaritan, had become a neighbour to the beaten and wounded man.

Now many of us might hesitate to identify with the Good Samaritan. Of course, most of us have stopped to help someone in need. But we may never feel we've become a neighbour to someone on that extraordinary level. So we may identify more easily with the priest or the Levite. They had good reasons to pass by - perhaps this man was a decoy so that hiding robbers could jump on anyone who stopped; an appointment to keep, a pressing duty to perform, or family responsibilities. We understand why they passed by. I've been the priest and the Levite. Probably you have been, too.

In the winter of 1990, the writer Michael Peterson appeared on a TV talk show in Toronto. He writes about his experience in "Chicken Soup for the Soul." At the end of the show he was walking back to his hotel. At Yonge and Bloor he saw a man lying on the sidewalk in four inches of snow. The sleeping man's only protection against the cold was a piece of cardboard. Peterson was shocked by the fact that the man had no socks or shoes. He thought he should stop and help but as the traffic light changed, he found himself being swept along by the rush of pedestrians to the other side.

We've all been caught up in the rush of life and passed someone by. We can identify with the priest and the Levite.

But there's someone else with whom we may identify and that is the wounded man. For

we've all been beaten and wounded along life's road, if not physically, at least spiritually and mentally, and we have scars to prove it. Sometimes we've been wounded through the thoughtlessness of others. Sometimes our friends have forsaken us. Sometimes we've fallen by our own foolish actions. Sin and evil have entered our lives and sometimes we've willingly let it in. People have taken advantage of us, and we've taken advantage of others. We are burdened by guilt and haunted by things we should have done, but didn't. We sometimes feel far from God and our neighbours. We fear that death will separate us forever from our holy God. In truth, we are beaten and wounded creatures who need a neighbour. And if someone doesn't stop and have mercy on us we will stay in this wounded, half-dead condition. It's not pleasant to see ourselves this way perhaps, but when we do, Jesus' story becomes Gospel for us.

Jesus asked, "Which of these, do you think, proved neighbour to the man who fell among robbers?" The lawyer answered, "The one who showed mercy on him." I'm sure we can all think of people who have proved neighbour to us, people who saw us when we were beaten and wounded, stopped unexpectedly, and showed us mercy.

In a famous Russian novel by Dostoevsky, the character Dmitry is wrongly arrested for the murder of his father. He is brutally cross examined by officials who hold in contempt everything he believes in. After the exhausting interview, Dmitry falls asleep and as he sleeps some unknown person comes and puts a pillow under his head. Dmitry dreams about the needs of others, of starving children, and his heart yearns for their suffering to end. A simple neighbourly act turned him from seeing himself as a victim into one who wants to be neighbour himself. Who has become neighbour to you? Who has slipped a pillow under your head? Who has shown mercy to you?

There is one who always proves to be our neighbour - Jesus. Jesus Christ is our neighbour who shows us mercy. Christ saw humanity broken and wounded by sin and evil and death. Willingly he came from heaven and was born as one of us. He stopped and gave His sinless life on the Cross to rescue us from our plight, paying the full cost. He did it in obedience to the Father who whose very nature is to have mercy on his creatures. Christ is the unexpected neighbour, for He was the ultimate outsider, despised and rejected and wounded by Jew and Gentile, with no place to lay his head, except on his breast as he cried out in death, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

But the Christ who lived and died is now the Risen and Living Lord. Christ is our neighbour, our Samaritan. He walks our roads, sees our need and stops by our side. He loves us in spite of our foolishness and sin. He comforts us, forgives us, binds up our wounds and feeds us with the bread and cup, symbols of his broken body and blood poured out. He invites us to cast our burdens on him and to trust him fully. For the life we long for, the life

of God's Kingdom, eternal life, comes from him. And we inherit it, not by trusting in ourselves or in what we do, but in Christ who has done it all for us. He sets us free from pride and despair, from fear and anxiety. He saves us from thinking that we can do it ourselves or that we can never do enough. Christ is the way to eternal life. Jesus Christ is our neighbour who shows mercy on us.

Several days after the first taping, Michael Peterson was back for another show. He was having coffee in the "green room" of the TV studio. All the important people had left and only he and the janitor were left. He seemed friendly so Peterson struck up a conversation. The janitor said that he had been feeling sorry for himself because his car had broken down and he had to ride his bike to work in the snow. But that feeling passed when he saw a man with no socks or shoes sleeping on the corner of Yonge and Bloor covered by only cardboard. Michael Peterson fell speechless as the janitor told how he went around the corner into a store and bought the homeless man a pair of socks and shoes.

At first, Michael Peterson felt guilty that he had not done this for the man. Then he was comforted because he realized that Christ had not left that homeless man alone, but worked through a compassionate soul to meet his need. Michael felt the peace of Christ's forgiveness, then felt challenged again, because he realized that along life's road, God would give him more many opportunities to become a merciful neighbour.

"Who is my neighbour?" Jesus' story teaches that the neighbour is the one who shows mercy on us, and that the ultimate neighbour is Christ himself. Jesus Christ is our neighbour who shows mercy on us. And it may be happening for someone here today. Christ has stooped at your side and he is touching you now with his grace and healing power. Christ stops and touches us by his mercy and then empowers us by the Holy Spirit and says, "Go and do likewise."