“Who is My Neighbor?  
January 15, 2006

Introduction: With what has happened in our community, and literally in our block this past week, I have been pondering this question, of who is my neighbor? In a world that is growing and with anonymity increasing, how can we know and serve others? The question of who our neighbor is, is one that has been asked throughout time. Let us see what Jesus has to say.

Loving Our Neighbor

One time, as the Pharisees was hoping to challenge and perhaps even entrap Jesus, and so he asked Jesus: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law? Jesus replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment, and the second is like it, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

This question was one of considerable interest at the time in rabbinic circles. Jesus provided them with an answer straight from Scripture, quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5, where Moses says, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” This Shema, the Hebrew word for hear, was repeated twice each day by Jews at the time. We are to love God for who God is, with reverence, commitment and obedience, as we acknowledge the Lordship of God in our lives. Also, Jesus quoted from Leviticus 19:18, where Moses says, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.” Jesus then answered the question with Scripture, Scripture that would be well known to them.

In doing so, Jesus provided a two-part call to love. We are to love God, and as we love God we are to love our neighbors. Jesus suggests that all of Scripture, the Law and the Prophets can be found in these commands. This call is so essential that we see it throughout the New Testament as the foundation for New Testament ethics and life in the church. In each instance, loving one’s neighbor is seen as basic and essential to Christian faith. As we love God completely and freely, we are also called to love our neighbors. Loving our neighbors involves more than our emotions. Loving our neighbors includes acting with their good, well being and
fulfillment in mind. This love is not based on merit. We are to love our neighbors for who they are, as fellow children of God.

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Jesus provides us with an example of loving our neighbor, when He shared the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Let us examine the story together. A man was travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho, which would have been a suitable location for robbers who preyed on those who frequently travelled to and from Jerusalem to take care of commercial or temple business. This man was quickly reduced to desperate need, for he was stripped of his clothes, beaten and left for dead. This man was in dire need of help and assistance and we are left wondering who will help him.

The first man who passed seemed a likely sort too help, for it was a priest, one who would know fully the call to love God and to love one’s neighbor. It would be reasonable to assume the man will stay and help. Tragically, even though he sees the man, he intentionally passed on the other side. He fails to help a man in need. Who knows why he failed to stop, if it was fear of being robbed too or fear of becoming impure in contacting a beaten man. Now, the man was even in worse shape.

The next man to come also appeared to be a good candidate to help, for he wss a Levite, ranked second to priests in the life of the temple and of the worship. Yet, he too like the priest, fled and passed on the other side. Two religious men, who know of the need to help, refused to do so.

The third man did stop and help. A Samaritan did what he could and had compassion on Him. This term pity or compassion means that he identified with someone’s situation in order to act on their behalf. He did not do this because he loved God, but rather because he saw how this man had a dire need. The love for one’s neighbor then was not restricted but extended to each and every person. The Samaritan gave the needy man what he had to share, giving him oil and wine, bandages and a ride to town. The Samaritan then provided for his care at an inn, enough money (two denarii) for the next two weeks or until he can return and pay again. This was also helpful as the man could never pay for himself.

Who is our neighbor? A neighbor is one who we will be ready to help and who is ready to help us. The Samaritan became a neighbor by helping the man in need.
By being compassionate and merciful, the Samaritan loved his neighbor. We are also to love in this way, by being compassionate and merciful, by caring for the needs of others. This compassion is to surpass any worldly or fleshly divisions, such as wealth, class, race or sex. Despite an assumed distance and estrangement of a Samaritan and a Jew, the needs of the man overruled this and they became neighbors. Our neighbors then are each person we meet, whether we know their name or not, whether we are like them or not.

How can we love our neighbor? By helping them instead of avoiding them or passing by their needs. By thinking of their needs and being willing to meet them, even when an encounter is unexpected or unplanned. By doing little things, such as being courteous on phone, by putting carts away, and big things such as being on the neighborhood watch, and seeking to provide tangibly for the needs of others.