



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Who Is My Neighbor?

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Imagine with me, you just receive the news that the house or apartment next to yours is up for rent. Old neighbors are moving out, new neighbors are moving in. You might be thinking, I wonder who my new neighbors will be? Will we become good friends, will we be similar in age, or culture, or also have kids or dogs, and will they help water my plants when I'm on vacation? Or, what if my new neighbors are noisy, messy, or put up an undesirable political sign on their lawn? How many of us, instead of trying to picture our new neighbors, would turn that question inwards, and ask, "How am I going to be a good neighbor to these new folks in my community?" When I first moved to LA about 7 years ago, my mother asked me if I had met my neighbors in my apartment building, maybe if I had brought some food over in an effort to get to know them. "Not really," I answered, thinking silently, "Mom, people don't do that anymore." But, maybe she was on to something. I have been thinking more and more about neighborliness, and about what our faith asks from us, how to not only recognize *all my* neighbors and our deep interconnectedness, but also reflecting on the question of what is required of me to be a good neighbor.

The question of who is my neighbor, is found in the story of the Good Samaritan. Out of the many religious traditions that we honor and draw from as Unitarian Universalists, some stories stand out and touch us in a way that transcends religion, culture and time, and I believe that this is one of those stories. There are many great and famous sermons about The Good Samaritan. My goal is not to top that list, but simply to remind us of the power of this story, and how we can pay attention to its call today. One of those great sermons, was by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. entitled, "On Being a Good Neighbor." In 1962 King wrote,

I should like to talk with you about a good man, whose exemplary life will always be a flashing light to plague the dozing conscience of mankind. His goodness was not found in a passive commitment to a particular creed, but in his active participation in a life-saving deed; not in a moral pilgrimage that reached its destination point, but in the love ethic by which he journeyed life's highway. He was good because he was a good neighbor. The ethical concern of this man is expressed in a magnificent little story, which begins with a theological discussion on the meaning of eternal life and concludes in a concrete expression of compassion on a dangerous road.

King says this story is a "flashing light" to plague our dozing conscience. In other words, this story is a wake-up call. It was a wake-up call at the time it was told by Jesus and then memorialized, it was a wake-up call at the time of the Civil Rights movement, and it is a wake-up call to us today.

First, let us examine this story more closely in its historical context. The setting begins with Jesus being asked a question by someone called a lawyer, a theological question about salvation and eternal life. This lawyer was not a lawyer as we know them, but refers to a specialist or expert scholar in the religious laws of that time and community, in the laws of

Moses or Jewish traditional law. Biblical scholar Michael Cosby comments that this is a well-educated man, who has come to test Jesus' theological understanding, asking a question that the scholar most likely already knew the answer to.

By asking the additional question, "And who is my neighbor?" the story tells us the scholar was seeking to justify himself, in other words, to show himself to be righteous, more knowledgeable and, also focused on his own individual salvation. In asking this question he expects that the category of "neighbor" be reduced to a select group of people, a small group versus everyone else. If we must love our neighbors, surely there are some people who are neighbors, and some who are not. It implies division between those to whom we are responsible, and those who we do not need to bother caring about. Instead of an abstract or technical response, Jesus forces his questioner to reflect on the nature of neighborly *responsibility* to any fellow human being, a responsibility which is both practical and requires immediate action, as well being deeply sacred.

Now as we enter the story of the Good Samaritan, let's imagine the environment. My study Bible notes that the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was about 18 miles long, with a severe drop in elevation. It was windy, with many curves, so that robbers could hide easily, and was known to be highly dangerous and deadly for travelers. After the man is robbed and beaten along the road, a priest and a Levite both pass him by. These represented the clergy of the day, and according to religious law, there were possible reasons why they were not allowed to help this man. Priests who performed ceremonial duties at the temple in Jerusalem, were not allowed to come into contact with a dead body. They might have also expected that someone else would come along and help. As Martin Luther King Jr. writes, they may have been worried for their own safety and fearing future robbers, thinking, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?"

When the Samaritan stops, he represents a community of people, the Samaritans, who were at odds with the Jews, and thus, not expected to demonstrate the highest moral values or show praise-worthy behavior. The Samaritan bandages the man's wounds, after pouring oil and wine on them, which were salves and antiseptics for that time, so he is providing medical care with his own hands. He carries the wounded man on his own animal to an inn and pays for his entire stay. The text tells us he paid two denarii to start, which Bible commentators say would be equivalent to two days wages for a laborer. The Samaritan goes above and beyond offering charity or calling the ancient equivalent of 911 for the man—he sees him and stops, he heals him with his own hands, and uses his own resources, including a substantial amount of his finances, to set the stranger back on his feet.

Martin Luther King Jr believes that the Good Samaritan, in contrast to the priest and Levite, was asking himself the question, "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" Not, "what will happen to me?"

By the end of the parable, Jesus has *not* exactly answered the scholar's question of "who is my neighbor?" Instead he has turned the question around and asked the questioner what it means

for himself to be a good neighbor, and if we can be as good, as compassionate, as risk-taking, as the Good Samaritan. The correct question is not, who is my neighbor? The real question is, am I being a good neighbor to others? *To whom am I a neighbor?*

The setting for being a good neighbor, could be the side of the road, inside a grocery store, waiting for your flight at the airport, or the voting booth. With each act, we can ask ourselves, does this look like love of neighbor? Rather than separate people into those who we have an obligation to help—maybe only people who look like us, or only people who hold legal citizenship in America, or only people who share our liberal progressive values—the focus is how we can build our own capacity to heal, carry, and love the wounded in our midst.

King calls this, acting from a *love ethic*. As Unitarian Universalists, we speak about “standing on the side of love,” but maybe it’s time to move from standing on the sidelines to actively placing ourselves on the dangerous highway, in order to travel alongside those who are most oppressed and vulnerable in our society. Acting from a love ethic may be more complicated than the direct action to an injured person in our path, it may be structural and look like creating universal healthcare, or closing inequalities in education or housing; it might be recognizing that sometimes we don't see the wounded person because our media and our cities are organized to hide them away. Again and again, in many different circumstances, we must ask, does this act look like love of neighbor?

Now, Neighborhood Church, is currently in the midst of a turning point in how we understand ourselves, as neighbors in our community here in Pasadena, on Orange Grove Boulevard. We are a busy and active church, and sometimes the size of our events and our community, does not quite match the size of our parking lot. This year, we are re-committing ourselves to practicing radical hospitality and generosity to our neighbors on Arroyo Terrace and in our immediate vicinity. We are re-committing to asking ourselves, are we acting as good neighbors to those around us? We can do this in our social justice programs, in our educational programs, in our partnerships with others in the city of Pasadena, in our day to day interactions with one another and everyone we encounter outside the church campus. Participating in Esperanza, showing up for racial justice, helping a Syrian refugee family to resettle, listening deeply to a friend, asking, “how are you?” and really meaning it—how can you be a good neighbor?

In Naomi Shihab Nye’s poem, an airport gate is transformed into a vision of beloved community. She too chooses to act from a love ethic, and an unfolding of connection and relationship occurs between her and a stranger, which spreads to everyone around them. Everything is not lost, she writes. The shared world is possible, anywhere. Her hope is my hope. It is our hope.

In our call to worship this morning, UU minister, Rev. Christian Schmidt uses the social media term “#Stay Woke.” How many of you know what that means? How many of you know what a hashtag is?

According to Urban Dictionary, “woke” means being aware, and “knowing what's going on in the community.” More specifically, being “woke” is being aware of the intersectionality of racism, sexism, and classism and other forms of social oppression or injustice. Being woke has been used to refer to talking about Ferguson, or other sites of police brutality against black people, and being skeptical of the official explanations for police violence, understanding how the media is influenced by a culture of white supremacy. It could also be part of a reminder to say the names of those who have been killed, including this week, the deaths of Keith Scott in Charlotte, and Terrence Crutcher in Tulsa. Stay woke is also the name of a documentary about the Black Lives Matter movement. Staying woke is an imperative, a call for us to continue to seek out the truth, in the face of violence and fear.

Staying woke, is all of our responsibilities, as Unitarian Universalists, as citizens, and as neighbors to one another. It is not enough to “wake up” once but, we must stay aware and diligent, knowing that the forces of society, including our media, but also other institutions, our schools and their history books, our politicians, and our churches, often conspire to send us back to sleep.

If we are too complacent, we will become like the priest and the Levite in the parable, relying on the safety of the law, not wanting to take the risk of responding to our fellow humans in crisis, preferring to avoid and move on quickly. If we are too complacent, we will become like the scholar, the one who is so focused on my own individualistic and personal salvation and the narrow definition of the law that I am not willing to lean into an expansive and inclusive awareness of compassion for all.

I cannot end without quoting Dr. King again. In the conclusion of his sermon “On Being a Good Neighbor” he writes emphatically,

No longer can we afford the luxury of passing by on the other side. Such folly was once called moral failure; today it will lead to universal suicide. We cannot long survive spiritually separated in a world that is geographically together. In the final analysis, I must not ignore the wounded man on life's Jericho Road, because he is a part of me and I am a part of him. His agony diminishes me, and his salvation enlarges me.

We need one another to survive. As Unitarian Universalists we are called to live lives of interdependence, knowing that each one of us is part of one body, one human family, and that the wounding, the suffering of any one of us, affects all of us. When black lives don't matter in our country, then all lives don't matter. When black people get free, we all get free. Choosing to continue to sleep, to pass on the other side, to ignore the plight of other human beings, might be our privilege, but it leads to moral failure and universal suicide. The keys to salvation and liberation, lie in our ability to act from the love ethic, our abilities to be good, “woke” neighbors.

This morning I challenge all of us to ask ourselves, what would it take for me to be a good neighbor? What am I doing, and what will I do in the future, to be a good neighbor? To act out of a sense of love, compassion, and justice?

My hope, is that being a good neighbor, is possible, here, and everywhere.
Amen and blessed be.