

**St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector

Scripture: Luke 10: 25-37

***"Who Is Your Neighbor?"***

A farmer was well known for his award-winning corn. Every year he entered his corn in the state fair – and every year he won a blue ribbon. A reporter interviewed him and learned something very interesting about how he grew it. The reporter discovered that the farmer shared his seed corn with his neighbors. “How can you afford to share your best seed corn with your neighbors when they are entering corn in competition with yours every year?” the reporter asked. “Why sir,” said the farmer, “didn’t you know? The wind picks up pollen from the ripening corn and swirls it from field to field. If my neighbors grow inferior corn, cross-pollination will steadily degrade the quality of my corn. If I am going to grow good corn, I have got to help my neighbors grow good corn.” **You see, his corn cannot improve unless his neighbor’s corn also improves.** The lesson for each of us is this: if we are to grow good corn, (or bear good fruit) we must help our neighbors grow good corn (or bear good fruit). There is indeed a relationship!

In today’s Gospel, a scholar of the Torah, a lawyer, asked Jesus a very pointed question: “*Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” Jesus quite cleverly answered by asking the scholar to tell Him exactly what the Law says. The man replied directly from his extensive knowledge of Scripture: (Luke 10:27) “*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 neighbor as yourself.*”

Well, Jesus was apparently quite satisfied with the man’s answer and He told him so, “*You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.*”” But the scholar of the Torah wasn’t satisfied with this – and so he asked Jesus: “*And who is my neighbor?*” It would seem that Jesus had him RIGHT WHERE HE WANTED HIM!

Jesus was about to take him, the others who were present, and all of us reading and listening, to one of the most dangerous neighborhoods imaginable.

I would like you to picture a winding narrow dirt road, about as wide as a car, in the Judean wilderness. This was the desert; rocks and sand were everywhere, along with steep cliffs and very deep ravines. This road runs from its lowest part, at Jericho which is approximately **1,000 feet below sea level**, going up, and climbing to its highest part – 18 miles away – up to the city of Jerusalem - sitting at about **2,500 feet above sea level**. This road is not only treacherous, but it is extremely well known for the threat of robbers and bandits popping up at any time. Its valley goes through what is known as the Wadi Kelt. A *Wadi*, or *Vadi* is a dry river bed that can gush with water during the rainy winter season, and this particular Wadi is known for its steepness and barrenness. This is the example that Psalm 126:4 speaks of the “*dry riverbed,*” “*streams,*” or “*watercourses in the Negev*” (depending on your translation) – and this may well be David’s model for his vision of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm’s “*valley of the shadow of death.*” (You can see for yourself at this web address: <http://lluker.faculty.ltss.edu/wadi-kelt.htm> )

In June of 1999, my wife Marilyn, our children John, Theresa, and I, were riding in a tour bus that climbed that very road from Jericho up to Jerusalem. There were many steep drops on each side of the road. Everyone on-board the bus was perfectly still; we didn’t want to tip the bus one way or the other. It stopped at a very deserted spot, and we carefully got off the bus, to check out the remarkable view of St. George’s Monastery, on the other side of the ravine. What seemed to be an isolated, deserted spot – became, in just scant moments, over-run with Bedouins trying to sell us Kaffiyehs (the traditional Arab

headdress), souvenirs and trinkets. A place where people could come out of nowhere, and be virtually everywhere, and then disappear just as quickly **was certainly not a safe place!**

The first thing that crossed my mind was of this Gospel reading from Luke chapter 10. We were getting to see that this was not a good neighborhood! Jesus had masterfully used one of the most treacherous places that the people who were listening could know, and he took them there in this parable.

The story that Jesus told began with a man heading DOWN from Jerusalem towards Jericho, when he was robbed, beaten and left for dead. We know nothing more about this man except that he was naked, penniless, and near dead. First century or twenty first century – that is not a good state to be in! He was apparently just an innocent victim! What a vivid story – especially on that road!

You can just picture that Jewish priest, coming directly from the Temple, heading down that road. He sees the injured man, and deliberately moves to the other side of the road. Can you just hear him now? **“No, I am not going to get involved!” “Besides, I don’t recognize him, and he is probably dead anyway. He looks dead!” “What if he is a Gentile? I could become unclean – then what? And if he is dead – then I am even more unclean!”** He left quickly and quietly, most likely thinking: **“He’s somebody else’s problem – not mine!”**

A little while later, along comes another servant of the Temple – a Levite. We get pretty much the same reaction and amazingly enough he even follows the same tracks as the priest, making a B-Line to the other side of the road! He very well might have had similar objections too. You know – **“I could become unclean, besides he’s naked, he’s not someone I know, and ‘he sure looks dead to me!’ And- what if the guys who did this are watching me, ready to jump me? He is definitely someone else’s problem.”**

Here were two men of God, who *“left God”* behind at the Temple. Apparently mercy is something they ask for, but not something they give. **“He couldn’t be my neighbor – besides, he’s not my responsibility!”**

Catherine Booth, who was the wife of the founder of the Salvation Army, was a well-known speaker. Wherever she spoke people would simply flock to hear her, and she would draw people from all walks of life. One night she spoke at a meeting; and in her words *“a great crowd of “publicans and sinners”* was there.” Her message brought many people to Christ that evening. After the meeting, she went to be entertained at a fine home; and the lady of the manor said,

- "My dear Mrs. Booth, that meeting was dreadful"
- "What do you mean, dearie?" asked Mrs. Booth.
- "Oh, when you were speaking, I was looking at those people opposite to me. Their faces were so terrible, and so many of them. I don't think I shall sleep tonight!"
- "Why, dearie, don't you know them?" Mrs. Booth asked;
- And the hostess replied, "Certainly not!"
- "Well, that is interesting," Mrs. Booth said. **"I did not bring them with me from London; they are your neighbors!"**
- Oh what must have been going through this socialite hostess' mind? **“They couldn’t be my neighbors – besides, they’re not my responsibility!”**

The poor innocent man lying on the road WAS the neighbor of both the priest and the Levite. And just like Mrs. Booth’s “dearie”, they just couldn’t see it.

Jesus continued with His parable – introducing someone, whom many Jews of that time would consider to be their sworn enemy – a Samaritan, who didn't avoid the poor victim, but instead **“he was moved with pity.”**

- Not just pity, but apparently a great deal of mercy as well, with absolutely no thought of himself and the risk of his own ritual impurity.
- He didn't take the time to consider that he was not in a friendly neighborhood, and the fact that if someone came along – he might be grabbed as suspect #1 – after all **“he was a despised Samaritan!”**
- This man was willing to risk any and all danger to help preserve the life of another human being.
- He gave the man the best first-aid that he could, with bandages, oil and wine, and then he put the man on his own donkey. He clearly wasn't thinking of only himself.
- This Samaritan took great time, care, and expense – paying in advance for the innkeeper to care for this stranger, and promised to cover any other expenses when he came back.

This Samaritan recognized someone in need, and didn't ask who this was, but instead he became this victims' neighbor – **and he took full responsibility.**

Jesus returned his attention to the Scholar of the Torah, and asked him, which one of the three was the neighbor to the victim? The man answered: *“The one who showed him mercy.”* He didn't say “oh, the Samaritan” but instead he said *“The one who showed him mercy.”* He had gotten the message. He didn't see him out of cultural eyes, or religious eyes, but for his compassion and mercy. Jesus replied: *“Go and do likewise!”*

Jesus was showing him, and through the words of Luke's Gospel, showing us, that you need to understand the needs of your neighbors in order to **become** a neighbor. In order to define what a neighbor is – **one must first become a neighbor – even to your sworn enemies.**

Just one week from now, this parish is once again undertaking a great event – **Rock, Rods, and Relationships.** This is the third year we have done this – and it is a perfect means for us, as followers of Jesus Christ, to meet and treat our neighbors with kindness, fellowship and love. It is free! Not the hotdogs and hamburgers, or the cars and the music, but Christ's love – which He wants us to share with one another. If you haven't signed up to help on Saturday, or cannot for some reason – then please, at least come and share His love with others. It might just be a welcoming “Hello” or a smile – or to answer an inquirers question. Jesus Christ offers His love and healing for others, in just a few remarkable hours. Come and witness it for yourself!

Jesus Christ, who in His own great mercy, freely gave His life on the cross, in each one of our places, so that we might have forgiveness of our sins, and the promise of spending eternal life with Him. HE became our neighbor – seeing in each one of us, neither friend nor enemy, but the incredible value and high regard of each individual life. **You are THAT Precious to Him!**

Jesus' very own example shows us love and mercy, instead of hatred and fear. He charges us to do our part, showing compassion to all – both physically and spiritually. He purposely replaces enemy with neighbor, and He calls us to do the same. You see, our enemies are our neighbors, and they ARE our responsibility! We have been called, by Jesus Christ, Himself, to **“Love even our enemy as ourselves!”**