

Who Is My Neighbor? Widening the Circle of Compassion

Given 3/3/2013 by Robin Mitchell

The "Thirty Days of Love" event that ended a few weeks ago made me think about our larger "Standing on the Side of Love" campaign and just how much I appreciate it. I think love is precisely the right motive for any religion to approach social justice issues, rather than anger or righteousness, and I'm very happy that we see that so clearly.

But in yoking love to social action I fear that it may blur the distinction between the two. It calls us to work on behalf of the oppressed and the marginalized, which is certainly where our activism should go. But is our love also reserved for them? Who exactly are we called to love, and why?

And so this morning I'd like to go back to our religious sources and look at two Bible stories about this very question, to see if they can give us some insights and to make sure we haven't lost anything important from our heritage.

The first story is from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus' disciples have asked him about the end times, and he responds with a whole series of parables about how to recognize them and how to hold yourself in holiness in preparation. If you've heard your fundamentalist colleagues talking about signs of the end, the whole "wars and rumors of wars" thing, this is probably where they're getting it from. The Bible doesn't really say what brought this on, but both Jesus and the people of his time seemed to be fascinated by the idea of the end of time; Jesus was one of many prophets in that part of the world peddling apocalyptic visions. And this all happened just a few days before his crucifixion, so perhaps his own personal end time was weighing on his mind.

At any rate, at the end of this series of stories he tells one called the parable of the sheep and the goats. Speaking of himself in the third person, he says the Son of God will sit on his throne on Judgment Day and divide the people into two groups as a shepherd would, the worthy sheep on his right hand and the dastardly goats on his left. Then he will turn to those on the right and say "Come, take your inheritance, the kingdom of heaven prepared for you. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

Then the righteous will ask him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we do any of these things?" And he will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did for me."

And likewise, he will tell the 'goats' on his left hand that they must depart into outer darkness because they saw him hungry and gave him no food, thirsty and gave him nothing to drink, and so on. They will ask him when they refused him help, and he will reply "Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."

Now there's a little more happening here than meets the eye – Jesus' listeners would have seen most of the afflictions he listed as not just misfortunes but as signs of moral failure. Sickness was often seen as a sign of God's displeasure, poverty could be either that or laziness, and being in prison is rarely something to brag about. So Jesus wasn't limiting himself to the "deserving poor"; he said that you serve God when you help the disreputable as well as the merely unfortunate.

This parable is the basis for much of the Christian social teachings. I suspect that if you asked the people at St. James Catholic church why they run the homeless shelter that we help with, they'd mention this story. It says that they help the poor and the outcast not just out of personal niceness, or because they think it's good social policy, or out of some abstract notion of justice. They do it to honor God himself, who resides in and loves even the least of these, his children. As the Catholic activist Dorothy Day said, "Those who cannot see Christ in the poor are atheists indeed."

And this story runs through our "Standing on the Side of Love" campaign, minus the bit about the outer darkness. We call it "Standing on the Side of Love" rather than "Standing on the Side of Progressive Social Policies" because we understand that it's about more than what we're doing on the surface. When we stand with immigrants who are being brutalized and scapegoated, we're standing with the spark of the Divine in them. When we stand with gay or transgendered people whose own parents sometimes hate them, we're standing with the spirit of God in them. When we volunteer at the shelter or the CRC to help people who got kicked to the curb by our financial system, we are giving food and comfort to the Most High. As we help and honor even the least of these, we honor all that is holy and good; the spirit of Love itself.

But these are not our the only people the Bible tells us to treat with kindness and love. There's another story that challenges us in a different direction, the story of the Good Samaritan.

This is one of those stories that's hiding in plain sight – we all know that it's a good thing to help strangers in need, and we've all seen those "Good Sam Club" stickers on RV's with their picture of a chubby-cheeked white man with a halo over his head, and so we think we get the point. But the story is actually much more radical than that.

To really understand it, we have to know who this Samaritan person was. The Samaritans were a tribe who lived next door to the Jews, and who were very closely related to them both ethnically and religiously. But the worst hatreds often happen within families, and that's what happened here – by New Testament times, the Jews and Samaritans despised and even hated each other for a variety of religious and historical reasons. Both Jews and Samaritans believed that it was wrong to have any contact at all with each other, to enter each other's territory or even to speak to one another.

So with that background, here's the story. In the Gospel of Luke, it says that a "lawyer", a man versed in Jewish religious law, "in order to test Jesus, asked him what he must do to gain eternal life." Now the bit about "testing" Jesus is obviously an editorial comment by Luke – he doesn't really know why the man asked the question – and in other places Luke tries to show Jewish religious practice as

legalistic and needing to be reformed, so I'm not sure how much I trust that claim. I think the man may have asked because he really wanted to know the answer – whoever Jesus was mythologically, he was clearly someone who drew out people's deep yearnings for wholeness, who, to quote Reverend David quoting Emerson last week, "inspired them to be what they knew they could be."

But for whatever reason, the man asks the question, and Jesus answers "What does your own law say you must do?"

"To love God with all my heart, and to love my neighbor as myself."

"Exactly!" Jesus says. "You got it in one. Why are you asking me?"

But then the man asks the key question: "And who is my neighbor?" Just who is it that I'm supposed to love as I love myself?

Luke says he asks this question "to justify himself", but I prefer to think that this man, like most of us, knew in his heart that his circle of compassion was too small and was expecting Jesus to encourage him to widen it. He was perhaps ready to hear that it should include all the people he was bound to by ties of community and kinship, difficult or otherwise. If Jesus had told him that his neighbors included the jerk down the road whose goats always got loose and ate his garden, or his mother-in-law who never missed a chance to remind him that her daughter had married beneath herself, I think he would have gone away feeling gently edified and encouraged to stretch his heart a little wider.

But Jesus wasn't in the business of gentle edification. Time after time in the Gospels we see people coming to him and asking questions like this, wanting to be told to be a slightly nicer version of the person they already are. And time after time Jesus tells them their whole paradigm is wrong; that to truly find wholeness they need to radically open themselves to unconditional love.

And that's what happens here - Jesus tells a story about a man travelling on a dangerous road, who is attacked by robbers who steal everything he has, beat him senseless, and leave him for dead beside the road. A temple priest walks by and sees the man lying there, and quickly crosses to the other side and passes by. A Levite – a temple assistant, kind of like a Worship Associate – comes by a little later and does the same. Jesus doesn't say why they ignore him, but it could be because they were afraid of being attacked as he was, or because to even acknowledge him would be to take some responsibility for him – the same reason many of us may avoid eye contact with panhandlers – but for whatever reason, these two prominent citizens, people any Jew would have been proud to call their neighbor, pass him by.

But then a Samaritan comes by, sees the man, and goes over to him and binds his wounds, dressing them with oil and wine. He puts the man on his donkey, takes him to the nearest inn and pays his bill for several days, telling the innkeeper that if that's not enough, he'll pay the rest when he returns from his trip. In other words, he goes far beyond what custom might require; he does what love requires.

Jesus then asks the lawyer who this man's neighbor had been, and you can almost hear his gritted teeth when he replies "the one who took care of him" – even then, he can't bring himself to say the word "Samaritan!" And Jesus tells him "Go, then,

and do likewise." Love even the Samaritans – the people you've been taught from birth to hate and look down on – love them as you love yourself.

So you can see why Jesus wasn't the most popular guy in Palestine. Imagine if one Sunday Rev. David told a story about a woman who got a flat tire in a bad part of town. A UU drove by and saw her, but kept going because she was afraid to stop in that neighborhood. Another UU drove by, but he was late to a worker-justice rally or a Buddhist meditation group so he didn't stop either. But then Sheriff Joe, on his way to his tent city to impose some new humiliation on the prisoners, or a group from the Westboro Baptist Church on their way back from picketing a funeral with their "God Hates Fags" signs, took the time to stop, helped her change the tire, and then followed her till she was safely out of that neighborhood. Who, Rev. David asks, was that woman's neighbor? Love them as you love yourself.

The new Search Committee would probably be up and running within a week, but that's the kind of impact this story was meant to have. It says that we're not only called to love the people who society despises and casts out, but also the people that we despise and want to cast out of humankind. Truly I tell you, the Bible is not for the faint of heart!

But why should we care about Bible stories? After all, one of the big reasons we're UU's is because we have chosen not to have our religion dictated by a book of magical stories that you have to take on faith. So why am I up here talking about them this morning?

First, because I don't think you have to take them on faith; I think that like any good stories they're telling us things that our hearts already know. I don't believe they're true because Jesus told them; I believe Jesus told them because they're true.

And second, I bring them up because they represent something other religions have that I worry we're in danger of missing. No matter how uncomfortable these stories make Christians, they're forced to keep confronting them because they're in the Bible, a book they have to take seriously. You may have seen the news a few weeks ago about two women who left the Westboro Baptist Church and are now looking back with regret on all the years they spent preaching hate. The catalyst for their leaving was, of all things, a Jewish man who quoted the stories about Jesus to them. These stories about love and forgiveness were so powerful and so hard for them to dismiss that they overcame a lifetime of indoctrination in hate and condemnation. I think that was exactly the kind of effect Jesus was trying to have when he first told them, and that's why they're a such a great treasure for the Christian faith.

As for us, while our Fourth Principle holds up the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, I fear that we may honor the freedom more than the responsibility. We do indeed have the freedom to throw out all the magical stories, but with it comes the responsibility to keep their meanings in a way that forces us to confront them no matter how difficult they are. I think our "Standing on the Side of Love" campaign has done that very well for the story of the sheep and the goats, but we may still have some work to do with the Good Samaritan. Rev. David and other UU voices certainly preach that we should use love to confront oppressors, but does that have the same authority for us that these Bible stories have for Christians? Would it be enough to make one of us turn our back on a lifetime of anger or self-righteous indignation? And if not, what do we have that would?

So may we find in our Principles and Sources something as powerful as these stories, something that will prick our consciences and trouble our hearts as long as any single person remains outside the circle of our love and compassion. For it is only when we draw everyone in that we will be able to enter into the kingdom that we have been preparing as UU's, the kingdom of heaven on earth, here and now.

May that be so.