

The Rev. John Morris
Sermon for Pentecost 5--July 10, 2022
All Saints Church, Littleton, N.H.

Texts: Colossians 1:1-14 and Luke 10:25-37 (the compassionate Samaritan)

For 28 years, my wife and I lived in the village of East Dover, Vermont, over the hill from the Mt. Snow Ski Area in West Dover. During that time, I taught at three different elementary schools in the area and served as pastor of St. Mary's-in-the-Mountains Episcopal Church in Wilmington, Vermont

Our neighbors in East Dover were Howard Wright and his son, Robert. Howard was an old Vermont logger and jack-of-all-trades. His son had a difficult childhood because his mother (Howard's wife) left the family when Robert was a boy and she never returned. There were always a few old cars in their yard, but after Howard died, Robert brought in many more old cars. At one point, we counted about 100 junk cars on that property. It was a real eye sore and an environmental hazard with all the leaking oil, gas, etc. We also thought Robert might be selling things other than used car parts when we saw nice cars with Connecticut license plates pull into Robert's yard on a Saturday night to buy something from him. Robert was basically a "persona non grata" in our village. He was an unwelcome resident and somewhat of an outcast. He died tragically in 1998.

Rewind to 1991: on Valentine's Day that year, a snowstorm had canceled schools, but my daughter and a friend wanted to go to Brattleboro (about 20 miles southeast of our home) that afternoon. Showing amazingly bad judgment, I agreed to drive them there. We left our driveway, went past Robert's house and then went down Jack Hill. Suddenly, the car hit a "greasy" spot, spun around, crossed over the road, and hit the guardrail. No one was hurt but the car was disabled. I got out to look over the damage, wondering what we were going to do. Lo and behold, who came over the hill in his pick up truck, stopped next to our car, got out his big chain, and towed the car back to our house? Robert Wright!

If I wanted to make my story dovetail with Jesus's story of the compassionate Samaritan, I would have had the pastor of the East Dover Baptist Church come over the hill and "pass by" us. Then I would have had the head Deacon of the West Dover Congregational Church also "pass by" on the other side without offering to help. Then I would have had one of us be injured and Robert would have taken that person to the local health clinic, waited for a doctor to attend to the injuries, and then paid for the visit.

None of that happened in my story, but that is basically what happened in Jesus' story. The Samaritans were sort of the Robert Wrights of Jesus' time. They were personas non grata, the outsiders, the "other." They were ethnically, religiously, and culturally different from Jesus' people. Yet, Jesus made the Samaritan the hero of his story, in the same way that Robert Wright was heroic in my Valentine's Day situation. Surprising to the lawyer who is interrogating Jesus, the Samaritan is Jesus' example of someone who will "inherit eternal life."

I don't think Jesus story is fundamentally about kindness and neighborliness. He was certainly in favor of those behaviors, as we all are. But I don't think that is the heart of Jesus' story. I think Jesus told the story in order to attack the prejudices of his day. Just think of a group of people today that you basically dislike or distrust, because they are socio-economically different or racially different or politically different or different in any other way from you....and make a person from that group into a hero of your story. That gives the story a real edge, maybe a scandalous edge, an uncomfortable edge. And that's one of the things that got Jesus into trouble.

If Jesus had just been a kind and neighborly fellow, a 1st century outstanding Boy Scout, he would not have been crucified. Instead, he would have been respected and honored for his good deeds and contributions to the community. Instead, he was a prophet who challenged the values and culture of his day and confronted the religious and political leaders of his time. He invited people to live in "God's neighborhood" (can I use that as another name for the "Kingdom of God?"). It is a neighborhood without carefully drawn boundaries and divisions. It is a neighborhood in which unrestricted compassion is the distinguishing characteristic of all its inhabitants.

A person who helped me understand God's neighborhood was Clarence Jordan (pronounced "Jerdun"). He founded an inter-racial intentional Christian community in rural Georgia in the mid-20th century. It was a visible example of "God's neighborhood." Many residents of that part of Georgia were not happy about the presence of Koinonia Farm, but Jordan and the people at the farm persevered through bombs, bullets, and boycotts.

I was fortunate to meet Clarence Jordan once. When I began seminary at Boston University School of Theology, Jordan was invited to lead a retreat for the incoming students. He arrived in his farmer jeans and in his back pocket carried a tattered version of the Greek New Testament. Besides his training in agriculture, Clarence also earned a Ph.D. in New Testament Greek. He eventually published his Cotton Patch Version of the New Testament, in which he translated 1st century Greek into the dialect of rural Georgia. I can still see Jordan speaking to us new seminarians and translating Greek texts from the tattered book taken out of his back pocket.

In Jordan's commentary on Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, he describes the four stages of human behavior outlined in the Bible. The first stage is "unrestricted retaliation." It is the law of the jungle. You poke out one of my eyes; I will poke out both of your eyes. You punch out one of my teeth; I will punch out five of your teeth. The second stage is "restricted retaliation." You poke out one of my eyes; I poke out only one of your eyes. You punch out one of my teeth; I punch out only one of your teeth. It is an improvement on the first stage, but it is still based on the law of retaliation. I am always discouraged when I hear people defend capital punishment on the basis of the "eye for an eye" text. I think Jesus wants them to move on past that stage.

The third stage in Jordan's analysis is "restricted love." It is the "love of your neighbor," the love of people in your tribe, the love of people in your group. The love of "people like us." (Several years ago, I was at a conference and met a person who worked at Pacific Lutheran University. I asked him for a big favor: I gave him some money and

asked him send me a baseball hat with "PLU" emblazoned on it. I now wear it whenever I talk about the love of "people like us." These days, like many people, I tend to hang out most of the time with people like myself—we think in similar ways, behave in similar ways, read the same things, and watch the same things. It is relatively unchallenging to love people like that. They are "PLU."

But Jesus took a radical step and invited people into the fourth stage, into God's neighborhood. Jesus challenges us to "love our enemy." He does NOT ask us to "like" our enemy. He does NOT ask us to feel "lovey-dovey" toward people who have wronged us or people we love. His love is not primarily an emotional reality. It is a commitment to treat all people with respect and to work for basic justice for all people, including Samaritans and Robert Wrights. In this regard, I believe there are no evil people. The image of God is in every human being. In all too many people, that image has been so blurred and distorted that we cannot recognize their basic humanity because they do unbelievably evil things. But somewhere deep inside those people is the image of God. So, as we are called to resist people's evil behavior with what the letter to the Colossians describes as God-given "spiritual wisdom and understanding" and "strength that comes from God's glorious power," we also acknowledge them as children of God.

So, what is the Good News in all this? Let me act a bit like a real estate agent and just invite people into God's neighborhood. It is a unique place to live. It is a beautiful neighborhood, even more beautiful than Mr. Roger's neighborhood! In his Cotton Patch Version of Colossians, Clarence Jordan asks people in God's neighborhood to "shuck out every kind of good deed and bust out all over with true understanding of God." He goes on to hope that "in everything that demands strength, you will have the energy of God's marvelous dynamo to give you all the patience and persistence you need." That sounds like a nice place to be. Welcome to the neighborhood!