

Who Is Our Neighbor?

Rev. Dr. Michael Tino

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It is Easter Sunday—a holiday of mass confusion for many Unitarian Universalists. Many of us like the eggs and chicks—symbols from the ancient European pagan celebrations of springtime. We like them so much, in fact, that we are tempted to make this holiday about spring.

But spring, as wonderful as it is, began last month. And today is Easter Sunday, when hundreds of millions of Christian people celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

To believe this story is literally true requires a leap that many Unitarian Universalists (and a good number of liberal Christians) are unwilling or unable to make (which is why we like celebrating spring so much—it's the real deal, every year, as anyone with pollen allergies will tell you). And so we are left with confusion.

To this confusion, I say that we can celebrate Jesus—the great prophet, teacher and leader—without making him a God. We can understand the Biblical stories of Jesus—whether or not they actually happened—to be the cornerstone of a great religion, a religion from which our creedless faith emerged, and a religion that informs our culture even if we don't share one of its theologies (ultra-liberal, fundamentalist or one of the many points in between).

And so today, I have chosen an often-told part of the Christian Scriptures on which to reflect—the story of the Good Samaritan, a story told by Jesus to those who surrounded him in order to teach an important lesson.

Because, to paraphrase a movie character from long ago, I do not think this story means what you think it means. Or at least what most people think it means.

Usually, when I hear the story of the Good Samaritan referenced, it's used to encourage people to act more like the Samaritan in the story—the person who stopped to help a stranger, who bandaged up his wounds and saw to it that he was cared for.

While that's a good lesson, and certainly one of the things Jesus instructs his followers to do by the end of this story, I don't believe it quite captures how the parable was meant.

Looking at the story, we see that it was told in response to someone questioning Jesus—a lawyer, in fact, who wanted to test this radical spiritual teacher, to see exactly what Jesus meant in order to determine whether or not the lawyer could follow him. Of course, Jesus' answer to the lawyer's test was in keeping with the ancient Jewish law of the day—so the lawyer needed to push further to see how Jesus interpreted that law.

Having been instructed to love his neighbor as himself, the lawyer responds: “But who is my neighbor?”

Who is it that I have to love as myself? Who is it that I need to treat with kindness and dignity?

Who, the lawyer asks, not what. He is not asking “how do I treat my neighbor,” for that is pretty clear. Who it applies to, however, is what he’s after.

In order to fully understand this parable, we need to look at the society in which it was told. The people of ancient Judea—the Jewish people—and the people of ancient Samaria—the Samaritans—did not get along with one another. Though they claimed a common heritage through the lineage of Joseph, they had competing theologies and claims for land.

The people of the day had been carefully instructed to both love their neighbor and, in equal measure, also to hate their enemy.

In a society that often defined “neighbor” to mean someone belonging to the same ethnic group as you, the challenge to see the Samaritan as one’s neighbor would have been hard for the lawyer to take up.

To the man asking Jesus “who is my neighbor,” a Samaritan would have been someone to avoid—an enemy, an undesirable, someone whose ritual practices made them unclean and untouchable. In fact, many of the leading religious authorities of the day specifically defined Samaritans as the lowest of the low—the worst, the most unclean, the most repulsive people of the region.

Jesus’ questioner would certainly have understood that choosing a Samaritan as the hero of this story was shocking, to say the least.

Jesus instructed a man who had an expert knowledge of the religious laws of his day that in order for him to receive God’s blessing on his life, he would have to show love, compassion, mercy and respect for those outside of his own circle—for those whom he considered repulsive, for those whom he considered to be his enemies.

Jesus’ teaching was scary to many people, but especially threatening to those in power—those who relied on deeply-engrained hatred and ethnic and religious warfare to keep their power.

As passed down through the ages, Jesus’ parable is equally challenging to us today.

Though our society might not be structured like that of first-century Judea, there are still people in our midst whom we would rather not have to think of as “neighbor.”

Who is it that you need to be reminded to show compassion, mercy, love and respect to? Who is it that pushes your buttons, makes you physically repulsed, gets you mad or evokes in you a strong, immediate and automatic response?

What group of people do you find yourself dismissing or condemning without a second thought?

Perhaps it's a group that doesn't share your political ideology, or perhaps people whose theology is radically different from yours—perhaps so different that they themselves would be intolerant of you if given the chance, which you would never give them. Perhaps it's an ethnic group—or a particular class of people in our society.

Whoever it is, on this Easter Sunday, I hope that we can feel the challenge from Jesus echoing through the years—we need to get over ourselves. We need to get over our pettiness, our shallowness, our insecurity, our prejudice, in order to fully see the humanity in each and every one of our sisters and brothers.

Perhaps the people we need to remember are our neighbors are simply those whom we have forgotten—people who have become invisible to us as we go about our daily lives, people who have become inconvenient to those with power in our society.

Usually, I don't admit to you when my sermons get written. Today, I'll make an exception. I purposely left this sermon incomplete when I departed last Saturday for a week of volunteering in New Orleans with our amazing youth group.

I did this because somehow I knew that my experience there would be important to how I made Jesus' parable come alive for us some two thousand years after it was first told.

And, I must say, this was true, for in New Orleans I met and heard tell of people who have fallen off our nation's list of "neighbors," both literally and metaphorically. People who, because of our society's inability to adequately respond to a disaster, have been displaced from their homes, who are fighting tooth and nail to hold on to what little they still have, and who are, in spite of all of this, giving everything they can to others.

Last night, as I was delivered back to our Fellowship's parking lot from Newark Airport, my cell phone rang. I recognized the number and answered.

On that Holy Saturday, amidst the preparations for Easter, it was Pastor Ella O'Neal calling me. You'll hear more about Pastor O'Neal in the days, weeks and months to come, as those who traveled to New Orleans tell the stories we collected. Briefly, however, Pastor O'Neal and her husband, the Archbishop Henry O'Neal, are the ministers of the Lift Up My Name Higher Holy Ghost Church just outside of New Orleans. They lived in the Upper Ninth Ward of the city before Katrina.

We met them when we were asked to help them rebuild. You see, they've turned their house on Pauline Street into a food pantry—one that has served some 50,000 people in the last three years. They've moved into their church offices—not comfortable housing for a couple in their eighties—so that their house can be used to store large piles of canned foods for distribution.

The city of New Orleans has threatened them with revoking their permit for the pantry, however, because their house lacks, well, pretty much everything. Last week, our team put up walls in five of the six rooms in their house, and secured a commitment from the UU Volunteer Center to send teams back there over the next month until the work is done.

And so, in the midst of this all, Pastor Ella O'Neal called me. To make sure our group had arrived home safely. In the midst of all she has going on in her life—and in her church's holiest and busiest season, she stopped to think of us.

And the least I can do in return—the very least—is to have us think of her this Easter Sunday. For she is our neighbor, and we must recognize that with every breath we have. All of the people of New Orleans are our neighbors—though we may have forgotten them in the years that have passed since their plight was on the news.

And today, she and her church are praying for us. Let us return their prayers ten-fold. Amen.