

“Love Your Neighbor”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
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Colossians 1:1-14

Luke 10:25-37

[The Apostle Paul said,]

*‘We have heard of your faith in Christ and of your love for all of God’s people,
because what you hope for is kept safe for you in heaven.*

You first heard about this hope when you believed the true message, which is the good news.

Colossians 1:4-5

Let us pray... O God,

May we be true to who we are as Christians and not be afraid to encounter people of other faiths.

May we be able to accept diversity, yet trust the hope that one day we may all be one.

Amen

The Apostle Paul wrote *letters* to those first gatherings of believers

that formed the first churches – even before they were called “Christian”.

This letter – or ‘epistle’, written to the church of Colossae,

opens with a greeting that was similar to how Paul began his other epistles.

In this letter to the Colossians, he complemented them and

their founder, Epaphras, but he would go on to caution them

about mixing in Jewish ritual and mythic spirituality
along with Christian rituals and teachings.

This would be confusing – especially, for newcomers to the Church,

so, Paul was urging the Colossians to stay focused on learning and practicing
who they were as *Christians* –

though as yet, that isn’t what they were called.

This is understandable and appropriate as groups of any kind struggle
to develop and maintain their identity.

The trouble with this, however,

which happens far too often throughout human history,

has been the conviction that one’s own group is the ‘only way’
and that everyone else has to become the same or be excluded.

On the other hand, the motto of the United Church of Christ –

which comes from Jesus’ final talk to his disciples at the Last Supper, is this:

That they may all be one... [John 17:22^a]

which does not mean that we should all be the same.

Our motto implies that unity is possible, in the midst of diversity.

Willard, p.2

In our Gospel lesson today Jesus is confronted by a lawyer who seeks to trip him up in debate.

The lawyer asks Jesus what he thinks someone must do to 'inherit eternal life' – which would be like a Baptist asking you, "Do you know if you are going to Heaven?"

But Jesus puts the question right back to him by asking what the Bible says about it.

The lawyer readily says that it is to follow the great commandment to love – to love God and to love one's neighbor.

Jesus agrees, but this fellow wants to press his point, so he blurts out, 'So, who is my neighbor?' as if to say, 'Where do I draw the line of who is in and who is out?'

Jesus takes this as an opportunity to tell a story in a format that – according to religious historian, Stephen Patterson, would have been a familiar formula, starting out with "a priest, a Levite, and ..." so forth like the jokes that starts with, "a priest a minister, and a rabbi walk into a bar".

For example...

A priest, a minister, and a rabbi walk into a funeral home to pay their respects to a local atheist who had remained on friendly terms with all of the local clergy.

This person had been very wealthy and – to the surprise of the religious community, had promised to divide his entire fortune between these three congregations.

However, it was with this understanding – that each must place \$10,000 in the atheist's open coffin before it was sealed.

At the viewing, the priest approaches the coffin, crosses himself, and places an envelope with the \$10,000 inside.

The minister approaches the coffin, says a prayer, and places the \$10,000 inside.

As the coffin is about to be closed, the rabbi comes up, places his envelope inside, but scoops up the other two envelopes to give back to the priest and the minister, saying, "I gave him a check for \$30,000."

<http://jerryalazar.blogspot.com/2011/02/r-is-for-rabbi-priest-and-minister.html>

In Jesus' day, to hear a story that begins with a priest and a Levite..., you would expect the third person to be an Israelite.

Instead, Jesus inserts someone totally unexpected – a Samaritan.

Willard, p. 3

Jewish animosity against the Samaritans went back to the days when Solomon's kingdom was divided

by the northern kingdom of Samaria – also called Israel, breaking away from the southern kingdom of Judah.

Eventually, the Samaritans – allied with Syria, tried to conquer Judah, but they were defeated and scattered by the Assyrians.

Those who remained in Samaria were mixed together with settlers sent by Assyria forming a hybrid of Israelite culture.

By the First Century CE – almost 800 years later, the Samaritans would be despised by the Jews of Galilee and Judea for their history of treachery and cultural impurity.

Therefore, to use the Samaritan as a good guy in Jesus' parable would have been a shock to his listeners.

The point Jesus was trying to make, of course, was that the Samaritans were "neighbors" deserving love and mercy, too.

But there is another point to be made as well – we are forced to identify with the one who had been beaten and robbed.

It is in those desperate circumstances of life, when we do not have the luxury of avoiding those we don't like, but still need to help us.

In this parable, the Samaritan's act of compassion transcends the prejudice of being thought of as an enemy.

Religious writer, Kathryn Hughey, notes that, when Jesus asks the lawyer, "Who behaved as a true neighbor to the one who'd been mugged?", the lawyer acknowledges that it was the one who showed mercy – but he can't bring himself to say the word, 'Samaritan'.

This parable gives us a vision of what life can be – an 'eternal life' that is not just "pie in the sky, by and by", but something for us now.

As a Christian congregation involved in many interfaith activities – whether that is an outreach to Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Pagans, Unitarians, Unity, New Thought, and others, as well as Catholics, Orthodox, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and others, we must not be afraid of the different perspectives they represent.

We only need the confidence that comes from knowing who we are.

We must first know who we are as Christians – like the Apostle Paul's concern for the Colossians.

It helps to know verses and stories from the Bible – like Psalm 23, to pray out loud – like the Lord's Prayer, and to sing hymns – like 'Kumbaya'.

Willard, p.4

But know that we have access to the Spirit of God who is a living being
and who continues to inform us, is still active, is still speaking to us.

We must know the differences and similarities
between ourselves as Christians and those of other faiths
and between ourselves and other Christian denominations,
before we judge what we accept or reject.

At the same time, we must have a willingness to judge ourselves and our beliefs,
but with the confidence that God will show us the way.

The story of Christ is unique – it is not about the hero who conquers evil,
but about the victim who reminds us of our own potential for good and evil.

Today's Gospel story reminds us that sometimes we are the priest and Levite
who walk by, or even the robbers, though we'd like to think that
we'd act like the Samaritan – that awful Samaritan.

But this story is best seen from the perspective of the anonymous victim –
the everyday man or woman who is at the mercy of this world's
capricious and often vicious circumstances.

This story is a reminder that we cannot judge others
without inviting judgment of ourselves,
and that we need to be grateful for the help we receive
from those who bring us God's grace, regardless of their affiliation.

As Jesus' journey to Jerusalem approaches its end,
we have been given a glimpse of how that journey would continue
after his earthly ministry.

His apostles would venture out of their comfort zone
to share the Good News of God's love with all the world.

As Christians of the UCC at The Villages, how shall we venture out
of our comfort zone to reach out to our neighbors –
friends and enemies alike.

Jesus' words to James and John
as they were turned away from the Samaritan village,
still resonate as they approach their journey's end,
when Jesus said,

“Don't you know what Spirit you are of?”

That Spirit is love and that is the way 'they all may be one'.

Amen.

Our lesson from Colossians 1:1-14 reminds us that Paul wrote “letters” to instruct and encourage the early churches as they were being formed – in this instance, to the one gathered in Colossae (ko-Law-say), a town in what is now western Turkey. In time, such letters would become holy scripture to guide the congregational life of churches ever since...

- ¹ From Paul, chosen by God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and from Timothy, who is also a follower.
- ² To God’s people who live in Colossae and are faithful followers of Christ. I pray that God our Father will be kind to you and will bless you with peace!
- ³ Each time we pray for you, we thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- ⁴ We have heard of your faith in Christ and of your love for all of God’s people,
 - ⁵ because what you hope for is kept safe for you in heaven.You first heard about this hope when you believed the true message, which is the good news.
- ⁶ The good news is spreading all over the world with great success. It has spread in that same way among you, ever since the first day you learned the truth about God’s wonderful kindness ⁷from our good friend Epaphras. He works together with us for Christ and is a faithful worker for you.
- ⁸ He is also the one who told us about the love that God’s Spirit has given you.
- ⁹ We have not stopped praying for you since the first day we heard about you. In fact, we always pray that God will show you everything he wants you to do and that you may have all the wisdom and understanding that his Spirit gives.
- ¹⁰ Then you will live a life that honors the Lord, and you will always please him by doing good deeds. You will come to know God even better.
- ¹¹ His glorious power will make you patient and strong enough to endure anything, and you will be truly happy.
- ¹² I pray that you will be grateful to God for letting you have part in what he has promised his people in the kingdom of light.
- ¹³ God rescued us from the dark power of Satan and brought us into the kingdom of his dear Son,
 - ¹⁴ who forgives our sins and sets us free.

Inspired by Luke 10:25-37

NOW LOOK HERE!

A LAWYER GOT UP TO CHALLENGE HIM, SAYING,

“RABBI, TEACHER, WHAT MUST BE DONE TO OBTAIN ‘LIFE ETERNAL’?”

SO, JESUS SAID TO HIM,

“WHAT IS WRITTEN IN THE LAW? HOW DO YOU INTERPRET IT?”

THEN, HE ANSWERED SAYING,

“‘YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART AND SOUL
AND WITH ALL YOUR MIGHT AND MIND.’

AND YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS BEING LIKE YOURSELF –
AS BEING KIN, AS BEING FAMILY.”

SO, JESUS SAID TO HIM,

“THAT’S THE RIGHT ANSWER. DO THIS AND YOU WILL TRULY BE ALIVE!”

BUT THIS FELLOW WANTING TO MAKE HIS POINT, SAID TO JESUS,

“SO, WHO IS MY ‘NEIGHBOR’?”

PICKING UP ON THIS OPPORTUNITY, JESUS SAID,

“THERE WAS A MAN WHO WAS COMING DOWN FROM JERUSALEM TO JERICHO
WHEN HE WAS AMBUSHED BY THIEVES.
AND THEY PLUNDERED HIM OF EVERYTHING
AND BRUTALLY BEAT HIM, LEAVING HIM TO DIE.

BUT BY CHANCE, A PRIEST WAS COMING DOWN THIS ROAD;

YET WHEN HE LOOKED AT THE MAN,

HE CROSSED AROUND THE OTHER SIDE.

AND ONCE AGAIN,

[A LEVITE,] A RELIGIOUS PERSON WAS COMING DOWN THE ROAD

BUT WHEN HE LOOKED AT THE MAN, HE JUST CROSSED AROUND, TOO.

THEN, A SAMARITAN,

WHO HAPPENED TO BE TRAVELING THROUGH THERE,

APPROACHED HIM,

BUT [HE] SAW THIS PERSON THROUGH THE EYES OF COMPASSION

AND HAD MERCY UPON HIM.

THIS FELLOW DRESSED UP THE MAN’S WOUNDS

BY POURING ON OIL, FLOUR, AND WINE.

THEN, HE PLACED THE MAN ON HIS OWN DONKEY, AND LED HIM TO AN INN,
WHERE HE TOOK CARE OF HIM.

AND WITH THE NEXT DAY, HE TOOK OUT TWO DENARII, ABOUT \$40,

TO GIVE TO THE INNKEEPER, AND SAID,

‘TAKE CARE OF HIM AND WHATEVER YOU SPEND IN ADDITION TO THIS,
I WILL REPAY YOUR ADVANCE TO ME UPON MY RETURN.’

WHICH OF THESE THREE, DO YOU SUPPOSE, BECAME A NEIGHBOR

TO THE ONE WHO HAD BEEN MUGGED BY THE THIEVES?”

AND THE LAWYER SAID,

“THE ONE WHO HAD ACTED MERCIFULLY TO HIM.”

THEN, JESUS SAID TO HIM,

“GO AND YOU DO THE SAME.”

Luke 10:25-37

[25] And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying,

"Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

[26] He said to him,

"What is written in the law? How do you read?"

[27] And he answered,

"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."

[28] And he said to him,

"You have answered right; do this, and you will live."

[29] But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus,

"And who is my neighbor?"

[30] Jesus replied,

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho,
and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him,
and departed, leaving him half dead.

[31] Now by chance a priest was going down that road;
and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.

[32] So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him,
passed by on the other side.

[33] But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was;
and when he saw him, he had compassion,

[34] and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine;
then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn,
and took care of him.

[35] And the next day he took out two denarii
and gave them to the innkeeper, saying,
'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend,
I will repay you when I come back.'

[36] Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor
to the man who fell among the robbers?"

[37] He said,

"The one who showed mercy on him."

And Jesus said to him,

"Go and do likewise."