

Here Comes Adam Clymer
from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Readings: Luke 10:25-37
Amos 7:7-17, Psalm 82

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Tracy Kidder writes in his book, *Home Town*, “The hospital was founded in the nineteenth century, in an age less euphemistic than the present one. The Northampton Lunatic Hospital was its first name. But the place wasn’t built to imprison what the mid-nineteenth century called lunatics; they were already shunned and tied up in their beds. The hospital was supposed to free them, to get them out into the country, to place them in front of lovely views and in airy interiors, to give them religion and outdoor chores, and thus to relieve them of the greatest imprisonment of all—by curing them.

“As the hospital closed down (at last, in the late 20th century) a lot of patients were off loaded into little old Northampton. A former inmate set fire to a downtown building, and two people died. Then, at last, the

state got busy, and a brand-new social service apparatus was erected. Rather quickly, the furor passed and Northampton got accustomed to its new strange characters.”

Tracy Kidder goes on to remind us of something Samuel Johnson said, “*A decent provision for the poor is the true test of civilization.*” Kidder adds, “Perhaps an even finer one is the way a place treats the mentally ill.” Kidder tells about an incident, not unusual in Northampton, involving a policeman on his beat downtown. It seems there was a fellow called the Hamburglar—named for a cartoon character—a tiny man who always wore a trench coat and got in raucous fights with himself on Main Street. He’d throw roundhouse punches at someone only he could see, then go reeling backward from the counterpunches. Sergeant Bobby Nichol would walk up and say sternly to him, ‘All right, you two. Break it up.’ And the Hamburglar would obey.”¹

Our text today tells about a conversation and a parable. The conversation is between Jesus and a lawyer who led himself into asking Jesus a question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (“Jesus) said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho...”

¹ Tracy Kidder, *Home Town* (New York, Random House, 1999) p.90, 91.

What follows is arguably the most well-known and, perhaps, most misunderstood parable of all those told by Jesus, The Parable of the Good Samaritan. You know it well and I will not take the time here to exegete it again for you. It is enough to say that a Samaritan along the road was the last person on earth that a devout Jew wanted to receive help from. Samaritans were thought to be apostate and to hold fast to an alien set of religious and social practices. A Samaritan was not one to whom the listeners of this story wanted to see showing mercy. They did not like the idea of this Samaritan being presented as a model for how they should behave toward others.

A few years ago Antoinette Wire, a professor at our seminary out in the San Francisco area, at San Anselmo, wrote a book about the parables. In it she wove a thread, a theme really, in which she presented the parables as stories which show us ourselves. Her book was called, **The Parable is a Mirror**, and in it she artfully led us into a place we had never been before: a place of discovery in the presence of Jesus. It was a moment of self-discovery for those of us who read the book at the time, and it still is. Dr. Wire leads us to hold up this parable as a mirror asking, Who is my neighbor? The answer may surprise us.

For officer Bobby Nichol in Northampton, MA his neighbor is a man he meets along the street who is mentally ill, seeing people who are not really there.

For sixty year-old Ellie Rothman at Smith College, in Northampton, the dean of a special scholarship program for women who had careers but had never been to college, her neighbor is Laura Baumeister. Laura came to Smith from California with an eleven year-old child and a lack of self-assurance that she could do the academic work, even though she had been admitted to the program. Mrs. Rothman saw to it that extensions were granted when Laura was too

intimidated to write her English papers or to sit for exams. Laura was convinced that she would be expelled. She even thought about it as an escape from this academic challenge. And then Mrs. Rothman did something rather extraordinary. Here is how Tracy Kidder describes what happened next:

Again Laura trudged up to the imposing façade of College Hall. She trudged up the stairs to the Ada Comstock (Program) office and into Ellie Rothman’s office. “I lied to you.” Laura said, when Ellie closed the door, “I was in your office a while ago, and if I’d been honest I’d have told you. I knew I couldn’t do the work. I didn’t go to my finals.”

“I know,” said Ellie.

“I understand if you have to kick me out, “said Laura.

Ellie raised her right hand, the palm facing Laura. “Wait a minute, you’re going too fast. No one has said anything about that.”

Ellie was businesslike. Laura listened in astonishment as Ellie took charge, saying, “If you give me your permission I will go before the Academic Board and plead your case.”

(Laura had always known that) if you screwed up school, you got kicked out. “But she’s saying that I’m someone worth helping,” Laura thought. She had never felt quite this way before. She thought, “What I’m having is what James Joyce would call an epiphany.” She looked at Ellie. “Will you help me?”

“Yes.”

Laura started to cry.

Remembering that day, she said, “I didn’t fling myself across her desk or anything.” She cried quietly, and Ellie, looking at her sternly, said, “Laura, you are going to be on academic probation and you’re going to meet with me once a week.”

This seemed like a brand-new, brilliant strategy. Even she could be a student one week at a time.²

So, who is my neighbor? Someone who needs your help, your “mercy” in the language of the parable, your belief that she can do the work assigned. Yes.

But, also, note that not only the student is a neighbor needing assistance. You also are a neighbor, now defined as someone who renders help to the one who is learning to be a student “one week at a time.”

Here, the lens of the parable is like a mirror that we can see through. I hold up the glass and the one who needs help sees herself and knows she needs help. The strong teacher sees her through the one way mirror and knows she is looking at her neighbor, someone who can use some help. But then the glass is exchanged and the one who is in need holds it up so that it reflects your image and you see yourself clearly. It occurs to the one who is figuratively in the ditch that “my neighbor is anyone who offers help, even if I don’t believe, yet, that I need help.”

Holding the glass this way, the one who was considered victim (the neighbor in need) shows the one giving assistance that he or she is also a neighbor, a neighbor who is in a strong enough position to make a

² Ibid., p.130.

difference, to give help, to shed light, to provide hope. The one-way mirror is now turned so that the strong person sees himself or herself as the neighbor. And so, we add to our definition: A neighbor is anyone who needs help (mercy); *and*, on other occasions, a neighbor is anyone who offers help, even when we think we don't want it, especially from that person to whom we certainly don't want to be beholden.

Which brings us to Adam Clymer and the last fresh perspective I will attempt to bring to this old familiar parable. Professor Wire says that if you are wondering who is the person, the neighbor, with the potential to render help, to whom you would least want to be grateful, just ask yourself, "Who would I least like to see when I and my ox are in the ditch?" This is the one you would least like to call your "neighbor."

"To whom would I least like to have to be cordial and thankful?" One of my Republican friends once told me, upon hearing this question asked in a Bible study, that the person he would least like to see offering help is Bill Clinton." He is at the bottom of the list of those I want to call my neighbor."

And just to keep things balanced here, I would suggest that for two prominent Republicans, our former President Bush and his Vice President, Mr. Cheney, the answer might be New York Times correspondent, Adam Clymer. Remember when they were heard saying, on an open microphone which they thought was off, "Oh, oh, here comes Adam Clymer."

"What a 'blankety-blank' he is."

"Yeah, big time."

You see, even for life-long Christians, like my friend who can't stand Bill Clinton, and for national leaders who have had enough of the press corps, affirming "who is my neighbor" is never easy. It takes grace and courage and a humble spirit. Jesus knew what he was talking about when he told this parable. He was talking about us: sometimes *we serve* our neighbor, the one without power *and*, sometimes, our neighbor is the one who serves *us*, the strong and powerful, who may not know all there is to know after all. We are still learning.