

Expanding Our Neighborhood
Genesis 4:1-9, Luke 10:25-37
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
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Our responsibility to others is a recurring theme in the Bible. In the Old Testament, Cain, seeking to justify himself, asked God, *"Am I my brother's keeper?"* In the New Testament, a lawyer seeking to justify himself asked Jesus, *"Who is my neighbor?"*

Cain was answered with punishment, cursed to wander the earth while the lawyer was answered with a parable designed to end our aimless wandering so we can be set on a new path leading to a new understanding of what it means to love one another.

But before we examine this parable we better first examine ourselves, for we, like Cain, almost every day are confronted with the question, "Am I my brother's or sister's keeper?"

Most of us wouldn't give a second thought to helping people we feel good about, and we're willing to help the other fellow if we get something in return. It's not that we expect an outright reward, just the satisfaction of knowing we've helped someone we love and care about is usually payment enough. You see, true friendship isn't based on "you owe me one," but rather the philosophy "pass it on", in other words, if you go out of your way for a friend or relative, you've received your reward and the only thing the other person could do to pay you back is to help someone else with the same spirit of good will.

Ideally that's how it should be. But realistically it doesn't always work that way because we're flawed, tainted by original sin, and even though we usually try to put our best foot forward, sometimes we trip ourselves up and fall flat on our faces.

Strangely enough that first recorded murder in the Bible started out with the best of intentions. Both brothers, in the spirit of worship, offered up the best fruits of their labors. Cain, a farmer, sacrificed to God the cream of his crop. And Abel, a shepherd, brought to God his prize fatted calf. But Cain felt Abel's sacrifice was superior, which probably reflects that somehow Cain saw himself as being inferior.

So, what we have here is the first recorded case of sibling rivalry and like any envious sibling, Cain got angry, which is normal enough, but instead of processing his anger in a healthy way, Cain struck Abel down, but instead of getting up and fighting back like he was suppose to, Abel's limp body just laid there.

Cain was certainly guilty of planning to strike his brother but probably wasn't guilty of premeditative murder. But the deed was done and Cain instead of taking responsibility tried to justify himself by asking God, "*Am I my brother's keeper?*"

In other words, was Cain, and are we, responsible for what we've done or what we've failed to do to those God places around us? If we're honest, the answer is "yes," but in a situation like Cain's we too will rationalize our way out of any responsibility; but be forewarned: we will also rationalize our way out of our humanity and like Cain, become fugitives from God's justice.

As I said earlier when Cain asked, "*Am I my brother's keeper?*" he was answered with punishment. But when the lawyer asked, "*Who is my neighbor?*" Jesus answered with a parable designed to end our punishment so we can be set back on that right path to enhance our humanity and save our souls.

Jesus came into the world to do just that and one of the major themes of his teachings was this: "*we are all neighbors, so do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*" Unfortunately, not everyone is receptive to that gospel and instead try to limit the Bible's concept of neighborhood by defining specific qualifications.

For instance, by Jesus' time all faithful Jews subscribed to the biblical formula, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself,*" but the legalists, those of rigid mind and heart, put a high wall around this all-inclusive commandment and effectively excluded most of the people it was designed to include.

Therefore, in the eyes of a Pharisee a neighbor was someone who, looked like him, thought like him, believed like him and acted like him. In other words, if you were a Jew and meticulously followed the Law of Moses which was composed of 613 rules and regulations (365 thou shall nots and 248 thou shalts), then you qualified. You were by definition a neighbor. And only then did you deserve all the implied rights and privileges.

Now before we criticize the Pharisees, let's be honest and admit in our own way we do the same thing. We're more likely to exclude than to include. We feel more comfortable with people who look like us, think like us, believe like us and behave like us.

That's why the parable of the Good Samaritan is as timely today as it was 2,000 years ago, because God wants us to first hear His Word and then expand our neighborhood so people once beyond the pale will be welcomed and loved by you and me.

Now, when asked, "*Who is my neighbor?*" Jesus knew the lawyer was trying to justify himself, so Jesus turned the tables on him. When he finished telling the parable of the Good Samaritan the lawyer realized that Jesus was really saying, "*You didn't ask the*

right question, so I answered what you should have asked." So, the real question isn't, "Who is my neighbor?" but rather "Am I a good neighbor?"

Jesus' listeners didn't expect that. Oh, they could excuse the priest and the Levite for passing the half-dead victim on the roadside. The priest couldn't touch the man because if the man was dead, in the eyes of the law, he was unclean, and therefore the priest too would be rendered unclean and therefore unfit to carry out his duties in the temple. The listeners could even understand why the Levite passed by. It may have been a trick and if he stopped to help, he might be the one beaten and robbed.

Well, by this point in the parable the people hearing Jesus may have been asking themselves, "So, what's his point? Where's Jesus taking us?" until Jesus said, "But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was..." At this point the lawyer and the other listeners probably thought, "Obviously the villain of the story has arrived," because as you already know, the Jews had no dealings with Samaritans because Samaritans didn't look like them, think like them, believe like them or act like them.

But then, Jesus pulled the rug right out from under them and he went on to say, "And when the Samaritan saw the man he had compassion and went to him, bound his wounds, set him on his own beast, brought him to an inn and took care of him." This was the turning point of the parable and even the lawyer was humbled when asked by Jesus, "Of the three, who do you think proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" for the lawyer could only respond, "The one who showed mercy," to which Jesus responded, *Go and do likewise."*

Like that lawyer we should be humbled too. We need the truth of Christ's teachings to transform our old way of thinking and realize we are one another's keepers and any one in need is our neighbor. It doesn't matter what they look like, how they think, or behave. They may live as far away as the other side of the world or as close as the inner city of Baltimore.

Christ is calling us to expand our neighborhood. Why? Because God loves us and we are commanded to love one another and when our personal and corporate ministries include feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and welcoming the stranger we discover our neighbor in need is really Christ himself for Jesus said, *As you do it to the least of my brothers and sisters you do it to me."*

That quote from our Lord's teachings should provide what it takes to convert us to a new and Christ-centered concept of neighborhood so God's guidance and grace will empower us to be good Samaritans, increasingly aware of our neighbors who need to be loved by God's children, Christ's brothers and sisters.