

Sermon: 19 September 2012
Luke 10: 25-37

I spent the summer crossing Riverside.
It was always a construction zone.

I never knew whether I could cross at 20th or 21st or 22nd,
but I did know wherever the sidewalk went that day, it would be gritty with gravel or dirt or
fresh-laid tarmac.

I never knew whether I'd be dodging steamshovels or watering trucks or exasperated drivers late
for an appointment at the Fairview clinics;
but I did know that I had to be alert, coffeed-up for the hike into campus.

I never knew how long it would take – anywhere from 15-30 minutes, depending on the length
of the convoy of slow-moving construction vehicles lumbering up and down the street,
but I did know I needed to allow for extra time.

I spent the summer crossing Riverside;
it was always a construction zone.

The construction in the neighborhood is still with us as the semester begins.
You know what? It will never end. This set of workers will finish this construction project –
and a winter's worth of pot-holes will pile up. We have to keep building, repairing, building
again.

This neighborhood, it seems, will always be a construction zone.

Interfaith work is a lot like that: another neighborhood always under construction.

We sit on the other side of the Christensen Symposium, which this year featured
Muslim-American scholar-intellectual, teacher-activist Eboo Patel, executive director of the
Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago. The fact of Patel's hyphenated identity did not go unnoticed.
Many felt the Symposium podium should be reserved for a Christian scholar. They remained
unpersuaded by Bernhard Christensen's own conviction that "interfaith friendships enrich
learning," a legacy he embodied as president of this college from 1938-1962. More potholes.

And Patel's visit focusing on interfaith issues coincided with the High Holy Days of in the
Jewish calendar, that time of prayer, repentance, and hope between Rosh Hashanah and Yom
Kippur, which meant the practicing Jews in our community were effectively excluded from an
important conversation – and their voices were silent. Neither those of us on the planning end
nor the Interfaith Youth Core people themselves noticed the coincidence – until one of my
Jewish colleagues brought it to my attention. More than a pothole – this is a sinkhole,
disappearing a whole intersection, sidewalks, roads, streetlights and all.

Interfaith work is always a construction zone; this neighborhood will always be under construction.

This knotty parable gives us three tips for life in a construction zone. [I warn you at the outside, I'm stuck reading this parable as a Christian of the Lutheran tribe. It's a huge blind spot when planning around the Jewish holidays – or the holidays or any other religious tradition, for that matter. I'm working on that. But it's a definite sighted spot – that is a place of certain, if limited, insight into the way the world works. It's got a helpful – even if it's not panoptic – angle of vision into things. From here, as feminist theorist Susan Bordo reminds us, we can see something. Not everything. But also not nothing.

So what can we see in this strange little story? Three things that might make life easier in a neighborhood that is always under construction.]

First tip: regarding the other as neighbor. The conversation takes place among a bunch of deeply committed, practicing Jews – Jesus, his disciples, this lawyer, all of whom want to be better at what they do. [Had he been around to guide us, Jesus, as a practicing Jew, would have known the dates of Rosh Hashanah!] But the chief designation of the “other” in this spiritual universe is to regard the other as neighbor.

[It's language that Luther was fluent, because Luther was a deeply committed, practicing scholar of the Hebrew bible, who himself studied with the rabbis at the synagogues in Reutlingen.] And we hear this language so much around this place: we believe that we are called to serve the neighbor – that we fail to realize how revolutionary it really is.

It's not the language of family, a community bound by blood. And if you don't have the right bloodline, usually on your father's side, you don't belong.

It's not the language of friendship, a community bound by loves and preferences. And if you don't have the right taste in clothes or music or pizza or sports teams, you don't belong.

It's also not the language of “enemy,” a community bound tightly together by hatred. And if you don't hate the same people I do, you'd better watch your back.

And it's also not the language of “stranger,” a non-community, to which no one belongs.

Regarding the other as neighbor describes a community bound together by place, nothing more – and nothing less. Neighbors share a common ‘Hood.

Second insight: you have all kinds of neighbors. They may be Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, Somali and Ethiopian and Norwegian and Swedish and Native American. I mean, there's just no accounting for who might show up in the ‘Hood. The lawyer asks a very lawyer-ly like question: “and who is my neighbor?” And I'm guessing he doesn't expect a Samaritan to be served up in response. Samaritans were not at all “good” in Jewish vocabulary

at the time, and Samaritans and Jews were always on the verge of open conflict, like Protestants and Catholics in northern Ireland, like Israelis and Palestinians in the occupied territories, like Sunni and Shi'ite and Alawite in Syria or Iran or Iraq.

And yet, a man beaten by the side of the road, left for dead, finds himself “neighbored” not by a priest, not by a Levite, but by a despised Samaritan. And, even more surprising, the Samaritan is not on his home turf: he’s the “stranger” in a strange land.

So there is the Samaritan, the unexpected neighbor.

Final tip: the neighbor acts with mercy, and the one who acts with mercy is a neighbor. “Neighbor” is really more verb than noun; in showing the dying man compassion, the Samaritan “neighbors” him.

But: the Samaritan also “neighbors” the lawyer, because the Samaritan shows him compassion as well. The lawyer looking for who is his neighbor – and he’s suddenly face-to-face with someone who’s soaking him with compassion, literally leaking neighborliness all over him. And it’s abundant and it’s unbidden and it’s there. And it’s from a person he considers unclean, unlikely, utterly unworthy. And the Samaritan is in effect showing him how to be a good Jew.

Oh, this is outrageous. But isn’t it also true: we Christians in the Lutheran persuasion are particularly zealous about bearing the face of Christ to the neighbor – and we suddenly discover the neighbor bears the face of Christ to us, unbidden kindness, unasked forgiveness, unconditional love. Luther, after all, has it both ways: we bear the face of Christ to the neighbor, but the neighbor also bears the face of Christ to us. And that’s the neighbor who is Samaritan, Somali Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist. And they don’t need to call it Christ, we just need to look – in gratitude and awe.

Ah! Interfaith work is not a luxury: for Lutheran Christians it’s a necessity. We wouldn’t want to be in the presence of the Mystery – and looking the other way. We wouldn’t want to be busy trying to bear the face of Christ to the neighbor, and overlook the neighbor’s unbidden, unmerited compassion for us.

Interfaith work is not a luxury; it’s the air we breathe.

But it’s always a work in progress.

This parable gives us three insights into life in the construction zone:

1. Regard the other as “neighbor” – and remember you’re a neighbor yourself;
2. Neighbors have nothing more in common than a common space – and nothing less;
3. Neighbors “neighbor” one another, showing compassion, leaking mercy.

Go and do likewise.

Bin:

And I am reminded of all those times in the gospels when the people closest to Jesus, the disciples who were with him 24/7, are also the people who are the most clueless, denying him, fecklessly falling asleep, faith is all about. The “outsiders” “got it” more quickly than the insiders.

Because finally the Christian witness is not about believing a set of doctrines – I mean, we in my tribe tend to act as if what appeared in the manger at Bethlehem was a book of confessions, or a bible – but what appeared in the manger at Bethlehem was a squalling, spewling, slime-bucket baby.

I don't know when this work will be finished.
But I do know it's the work that's worth doing.

theater in the round: When I couldn't see the action on stage, I watched the faces of the people across from me, seeing the play through their eyes, their reactions. This was in California – they reacted a lot more than most Minnesotans.

why interfaith work is not a luxury? Beyond mere openness....

Who bears the face of Christ to Christ – gosh, in the text in front of us, it seems to be the Canaanite woman – he protests that he's sent, as he is particularly in matthew's gospel, to the lost sheep of the house of Israel....

She begs to differ
and Jesus changes his tune, having seen in her plea the kindness of the Lord –
of the kindness of the Lord the earth is full!

Scheduled a multi-faith advisory council meeting during Rosh Hashanah, one of the high holy days for the Jews among us – many of whom were on the committee – and I heard about it quickly, emphatically, and directly

It hurt – it hadn't been the first time,
Long conversation over a lunch neither of us could eat: stories of invisibility, that particular style of prejudice that comes from “liberal” people – even harder to identify than open animosity or anti-Semitism

But for all that, because of all that – the possibility of forgiveness

face of Christ

Jesus would have never for

In the wake of the RNC and DNC, David Brooks complained the political parties have lost their “wings.” The comment kind of slowed me down -- I’m thinking, yeah they do seem kind of earth-bound, but wings, taking flight – really? And the image of Paul Ryan aloft crossed my imagination, which depending on your political affiliation could be inspiring – or truly frightening.

And when I came back to the interview, it was clear that David Brooks was talking about the left wing of the Republican party, as distinct from the right wing of the Republican party. The right wing of the Democratic party, as distinct to the left wing of the Democratic party.

But OK: I was at the Humphrey Center across the street listening to Krista Tippett interview a group that has not lost its wings, two representatives of “evangelical” Christianity, Jim Daly President of Focus on the Family, and Gabe Lyons, founder of “Q” and author of *The Next Christians: The Good News about the End of Christian America*. Both are card-carrying “evangelical” Christians, they represent significant diversity in a movement most of us regard as being more monolithic than it isn’t.

Acts of Faith and Sacred Ground:

interfaith triangle:

attitude

relationships

knowledge

Sacred Ground:

god listens closely in the dawn hours.

Science of interfaith cooperation

art to interfaith leadership

Cordoba House: