

1

When we had the recent warm weather, I eagerly took my dogs outside for a walk. As I walked along the sidewalks, I noticed the homes in my neighborhood. Some had front porches with chairs, while many had beautiful yards but nowhere to sit and enjoy them. Years ago most homes had front porches where neighbors would sit and greet one another as they walked by, but through the years gathering places have moved to back yards behind fences, reducing conversations with our neighbors.

Some neighbors still keep a close eye on what's happening, checking out what's going on around them, as did one young woman who had just moved into a new neighborhood with her husband.

One morning while the couple was eating breakfast, the young woman saw her neighbor hanging the wash outside. "That laundry is not very clean," she said. "She doesn't know how to wash correctly. Perhaps she needs better laundry soap." Her husband looked on, but remained silent.

Every time her neighbor would hang her wash to dry, the young woman would make the same comments. About one month later, the woman was surprised to see a nice clean wash on the line and said to her husband, "Look, she has learned how to wash correctly. I wonder, who taught her this?"

Her husband said, "I got up early this morning and cleaned our windows."¹

Luke's Gospel tells us about a different kind of story about neighbors, about a conversation Jesus had with a legal expert who wanted to know how he could gain eternal life. Jesus asked what was written in the Torah, the Jewish scriptures, and the man quoted from Deuteronomy 6:5: "Love God with all your heart, being, strength, and mind," followed by a quotation from Leviticus 19:18: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Ding, ding, ding. You got it right!

"Could you clarify that a bit more, Jesus—just who is my neighbor?"

2

This question from the legal expert in Luke's Gospel prompted me to think about all the neighbors I have encountered though the years. Every time I have moved and settled into a new home, I often wondered what the neighbors would be like. Some have been friendly and welcoming and greeted us soon after we arrived. Some have had children who loved to visit us since they thought we were so much fun. Some neighbors remained in their homes, and I rarely ever saw them. Others I never met.

Just who is my neighbor? The person next door? Across the street? On the same block? On the other side of town? In our interconnected electronic social media world, could someone I talk with on Facebook be my neighbor who lives on the other side of the world?

In response to the question, Jesus told a parable, a story so familiar to us that we take it for granted. You know the story. Help me tell it.

A man was walking along the road and what happened to him? ...

Who came by? ...

What did they do? ...

Who helped the man? ...

The meaning of neighbor became a bit clearer this past week as I was involved with prayer gatherings and meetings in regard to the Grand Jury proceedings for Norman Gary, who had been shot back in December when police officers responded to a call for assistance. Until this week details about what happened were mysterious and uncertain as everyone waited for the results of the investigation.

While waiting, a group of 80 people gathered for a candlelight prayer vigil last Sunday evening near the location where the incident took place. Like the person in Jesus' parable, I thought of all kinds of reasons I could not go: it was a busy day and I had a lot to do. It's a neighborhood that may not be the safest. I don't know the family. What will my congregation think of my involvement?

Someone at the event said she had brought her son, but he had complained about going: "Mom, I don't even know the family, so why should I go?"

3

This is not our neighborhood, so I don't really want to go there. What good will it do anyway?"

Reluctantly he went, and after seeing the crowd gathered together for prayer and song, a group of white and black people standing in a circle holding hands, he said to his mom, "Now I see why we came."

Is it possible that our neighbors include even the people we don't know, those who may be in pain and sorrow, those who may be searching for answers to their questions about life?

Author and lecturer Leo Buscaglia once talked about a contest he was asked to judge. The purpose of the contest was to find the most caring child.

The winner was a 4-year-old child whose next-door neighbor was an elderly gentleman who had recently lost his wife. Upon seeing the man cry, the little boy went into the old gentleman's yard, climbed onto his lap, and just sat there.

When his mother asked what he had said to the neighbor, the little boy said, "Nothing, I just helped him cry."²

I imagine that's what Jesus had in mind when he told the parable about the Samaritan who helped a stranger. Have you ever wished you could hear from the characters in Jesus' parables, as though they could come here and tell their stories? Wouldn't that be amazing if Jesus' parable came to life?

No one seems to care about my part in Jesus' parable, so I have come to life today to defend myself, to explain why I did what I did. For centuries, everyone seems to focus on the guy from Samaria who helped a man who got beat up and robbed along a road leading from Jerusalem to Jericho. The guy was traveling along a dangerous road, often called in my day the "Bloody Pass." It's a dangerous road, filled with twists and turns and lots of hiding spots for robbers. I hesitated to travel the road myself, but I had been in Jericho and was heading to the temple in Jerusalem.

When I saw a man along the road, how could I tell whether robbers had put him there as a lure to get me to stop so they could rob me? I was afraid to get involved. If he really needed help, I wanted to help the guy along the road, but I had already

④

walked many miles, and to stop would further delay my arrival. People were waiting for me, and I had important responsibilities when I arrived.

You see...I am a Levite, from the tribe of Levi, and I had political and religious duties. I was considered an important leader among my people—I had a reputation to protect!

I was traveling to Jerusalem to fulfill my responsibilities for worship at the temple, and when I saw the man's wounds, I thought he was dead. If I was to touch a dead body, according to our religious law, I would become unclean—which meant I could not help lead worship in Jerusalem. Just imagine what my people would have thought if I showed up and could not fulfill my duties.

I later heard the man was not dead and that someone had helped him, and I was relieved—until I heard that a Samaritan came to his aid. Of all people! I felt terribly guilty that I did not stop, that a low-life Samaritan was the one to help him. But what did he have to lose? That Samaritan was already an outcast, so he didn't have to risk getting unclean, for we considered their entire people unworthy!

I suppose Jesus used me in his story to make a point—a point that even though I was religious and

devout, I let my duties and reputation get in the way of helping someone in need. He also made the point that sometimes those we consider unworthy are still worthy in God's eyes, for the Samaritan was the good guy in the story.

If you stop and think about your own life, I imagine you might relate to my experience. Have you ever been in such a hurry that you didn't take time to help someone in need? Or maybe you wanted to protect your status in life and not get involved with the messiness of helping certain people? Have you ever been afraid to get involved?

Jesus may have made up this story about the Good Samaritan, the guy along the road, and me, but I think it's a true-to-life experience for most of us. (Extinguish candle)

© Douglas Cripe, 2017

During this season of Lent, as we prepare for the suffering of Holy Week and the Easter good news, may you ask the question, "Who is my neighbor?" When you recognize the neighbors all around you, walk with them together toward the cross.

¹ Adapted from www.homileticsonline.com.

² from www.homileticsonline.com.