

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
“Both the Long Term and the Short Term Matters”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, July 14, 2019

Amos 7:7-17

This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb-line, with a plumb-line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, ‘Amos, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘A plumb-line.’ Then the Lord said, ‘See, I am setting a plumb-line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.’

Amaziah Complains to the King

Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, ‘Amos has conspired against you in the very centre of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, “Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.”’

And Amaziah said to Amos, ‘O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.’

Then Amos answered Amaziah, ‘I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel.”’

Now therefore hear the word of the Lord.

You say, “Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.”

Therefore, thus says the Lord:

“Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parcelled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.”’

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ He 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 with all your mind; and your neighbour 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 neighbour?’ Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

Will you pray with me? Holy God be with us now as we consider your word for us. It's challenges, it's meanings, and the possibilities. Bless this time that we might wrestle together in Christ's name. Amen.

I am sure that many of you, especially being Presbyterian, have been to a number of meetings over the years--a number of meetings over the years that included opportunities to ask questions, and sometimes that had its challenges. Presbytery meetings opens the floor to questions when we examine a candidate for ministry. Many questions are straight forward or are asking for more information or clarification. Sometimes people use it to pontificate. Or sometimes they use it to ask a question with a hidden or not so hidden agenda. And as I thought about that I remembered a long-ago presbytery meeting at Webster Grove's Presbyterian, when Margaret Duerksen, from the southern part of the presbytery, was being examined on the floor for ordination. She was among the first women to do so in our presbytery. There was some anxiety around the edges. So she shared her statement of faith and the floor was opened to questions. Several good questions were asked and she answered them with her wonderful southern accent.

Then one particular person went to the mic. I could feel the inward groans because this person was notorious for asking loaded questions. He looked at her and said, "Margaret can you tell me the difference between supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism?" What? One scholar summed up the use of such words as terms that are often used only when seminary students want to remind people they are in seminary. Pastors of a certain ilk toss around the words to demonstrate how impractical theology can be, and parishioners hear the words and just cringe. And that's what we all did. It was a theological geek question, and I looked at my colleague with a doctorate in theology and said, "Huh?" And he said, "Remember it has to do with predestination." I was like, "Oh. Right, right." But we all knew it was a loaded question meant to stump her. But to the delight of most of us, Margaret simply said, "Well, I do not know what supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism are, but I will tell you what I do know." And she proceeded to talk about faith in ministry in ways that assured all of us that she would be a fine pastor, thank you very much.

So questions sometimes do tell us more about the questioner than the one being questioned. And as I looked at today's reading on the Good Samaritan it's clear that's what's going on with the lawyer. This time because of the book by Amy-Jill Levine I got some new insights. Now what's different about Amy-Jill Levine is she's a professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt University. Yes, Judy Muller, Vanderbilt. But what makes her perspective different than most New Testament professors is that she's a Jewish scholar viewing these scriptures through the lens of her faith. She makes the case that authors of the Gospels are often writing through a filter of their own. They're writing in the years after Jesus' resurrection when many of the followers were being persecuted. It's natural that their perspectives would be shaped," she said, "just as we are by experiences in our own lives." She also helped me to see the difference between some of Paul and the Gospels. Because while Acts talks about Paul's life in historical sense, so many of Paul's letters are written as accounts of events he experienced himself in real-time. The gospel writers use writings of the past and oral histories and they were not present at many of the events they describe. Consider that the writer of Luke could not have been at the birth of Jesus, but tells us about it to make sure that we understood that Jesus is a human being. So Professor Levine traces the various interpretations of this parable by those who refer to the Good Samaritan in speeches. By people such as President Bush, and Queen Elizabeth, and Tony Blair. She said that in Sierra Leone the parable is seen from the perspective of the injured man. Reminding them that there will be times when they need to take help even if it's from the enemy. Referring to the Soviet Union helping their country in a time of need. She says, "The parable has many interpretations that reflect cultural context. But," she said, "it's also important to look at and examine and understand it's original meaning." For Levine, it's important for us to realize that the writer of Luke wants to share his view of Jesus and to emphasize the conflict between the Jewish leaders and Jesus because they saw him as a troublemaker. So let's look at the reading.

The first thing is a question from the pharisee, the lawyer. "What must one do to inherit eternal life?" Now the translation of the verb in Greek when the person approaches is test. He is testing Jesus, and that's what we're told. Now Jesus knows this and he responds in the way that wise people do when faced with a trick question. He answers the question with a question. "But," she says, "what's interesting is how this question is framed. What must one do to inherit eternal life? Here," she says, "he asks a question that can't be answered according to Jesus teachings because faith, not work, grace, not deeds, are what matters. No one can earn their way to Heaven. This man thinks of eternal life as a commodity to be acquired rather than a gift freely given. She said, "Jewish thought though is to be living your life in the here and now and tomorrow will take care of itself." But it's clear this man knows his scriptures and responds to Jesus' question with the correct scriptural statements about worshipping God and loving neighbor. Jesus acknowledges

that this is right. And if the man had stopped there that would be fine. But he doesn't. He asks another loaded question. "And who is my neighbor?" Levine points out we're entering a whole different arena now. Neighbor, in those days, had been about one with whom one was in a legal relationship with. As a neighbor is a citizen and others who are not are not your neighbor, those outside the faith are not required to follow your laws. But she says that does not mean you do not help the other, for their law clearly states you are to care for the stranger, and the widow, and the orphan, to help those in need. She says essentially the question he's asking then is not so much, "Who is my neighbor?" but, "Who is not my neighbor?" A means of justifying himself about why he might not respond to someone in need. But with Jesus, the meaning of neighbor changes because it is no longer just a legal relationship, because for Jesus love changes everything, not only with regard to neighbors and those in need, but with Jesus, even with our enemies. "This is different," she says, "Because in Jewish thought, the law states one cannot mistreat the enemy. It is Jesus who states one must love their enemy." So this changes everything. For Jesus, the law is the means for showing them how to live and to be in relationship to neighbor, and that to love their neighbor, one must act. And to make that clear, Jesus then turns to the parable. Now she points out that this parable is often interpreted as a story of two faithful people who ignore someone in need who are shown up by a Samaritan who symbolizes the Christian and how good a Christian should be. But she says they often say this based on the fact that the person is portrayed as not wanting to become unclean because they would have to go through ritual cleansing before they went into the temple. But she says, "Look carefully. The priest isn't going to Jerusalem. The priest is heading home. Purity is not the issue here." She wonders if it is not that the Samaritan represents Christians, but that the Samaritan represents the enemy, and is even more shockingly lifted up as the righteous one.

A parallel might be the long-held feud between the Hatfields and The McCoys. When a Hatfield learns that one of the McCoy's stopped on the road to save their brother, what are they supposed to think? The parable is startling because the one who shows mercy is the other, the most unexpected one. Jesus does not discriminate. Even a Samaritan, the one that the Jews disdained and distrusted, was invited to live out the kind of faith that Jesus was teaching. Levine says that in his writings, Martin Luther King pointed out the concern that the Levite and the priest saw the others through the concerns for themselves and what it will mean for them if they helped this person. "But the Samaritan," he writes, "sees it differently." The Samaritan says, "If I don't stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" The Samaritan does stop and shows us what God would have us do, to respond with mercy and compassion. Martin Luther King was speaking about this in terms of the garbage workers on strike in Memphis. Levine goes on to say the parallels today are very significant. In this parable, legal or not is not the issue with regard to the neighbor. The needs of the neighbor include everyone. Everyone, even those at our borders in the camps. We are called to consider. If they are not helped, what will happen to them? Levine says love of God and neighbor cannot be separated. They are not only to exist in the abstract, they are to be acted out every day in our everyday lives with our youth on mission trips and our adults on other trips that also carry out mission. But she says there's one more thing. It means more than we are to treat our neighbor as we would want to be treated. We should also be willing to understand how it is our neighbors would like to be treated, to consider it from their perspective and not just our own.

I saw a short episode on the news this week that spoke to that. It was a young 5th grader who won the Breaking Barriers essay contest. Out of 10,000 essays submitted, hers was chosen. And she talked about being American-born here to parents who immigrated from Pakistan. Esme is a Muslim. And she shared how she often feels like an outsider and about how hard it is to live out her faith, and sometimes she does not want to wear her headdress because people treated her so differently. She wrote honestly, trying to explain her faith and tradition so that others might understand her better and not be so uncomfortable around her. The interview also included a conversation with her teacher who said she was stunned and realized how lonely Esme must feel, and hoped they could make her feel more welcome. The organizer of the contest came to her school and congratulated her and invited her to share the essay with her fellow students. And Esme said it has been a turning point. It helped others to better understand her and she has felt more included since then. But what intrigued me too was that the episode closed with a statement that the winning contest came with some perks. She won an all-expense-paid trip to the All-Star Game this week, and she was honored there. And I found myself wondering, "Why baseball?" What an odd connection. But then I learned that the Breaking Barriers program was created by Major League Baseball, Scholastic Books, and their leading spokesperson is Sharon Robinson. Now it made sense. Sharon's father was Jackie Robinson, the first black baseball player in the major leagues. And he too had experienced being treated as the other and not as a neighbor. It brought back memories growing up. I was skating on the pond in the neighborhood one night-- in a neighborhood of a friend one night and he pointed out with admiration, "You know whose house is up there? Jackie Robinson's." And I was awestruck because we thought a

lot of him in my hometown of Stanford. But it wasn't until years later that I learned how difficult this move had been for him. Robinson's tried for some time to find a home in Greenwich and other nearby towns, and they were not welcome at all. But the article I read about this included an interview with Carly Simon. Yeah, Carly Simon, the singer. The Simon's were friends with the Robinsons and invited them to live with them until a determined real estate agent helped them find a home. It was then that I learned that while his presence in my hometown had been spoken of with admiration, it had not been an easy journey. He, and others, and their actions helped him become a neighbor in the literal sense. It took courage for both of them.

I think Professor Levine unwraps this parable in such a way that we see so many different layers--how Jesus expands the meaning of neighbor in powerful ways, the Samaritan is the most unexpected actor in this parable, he challenges our approach to life, to be aware that we are called to love both those like us and those different from us. Who is my neighbor? Jesus says everyone, even the most unexpected ones. The parable is a reminder that a neighbor is not someone who lives next door, but anyone who is a child of God. Who is my neighbor? Jesus tells us the one to whom we are called to show mercy. And He tells us to go and do likewise. Amen.