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Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Proper 10, Yr C

" [He] asked Jesus, 'Who is my neighbor?' "



[in character] Now, I reckon, if we're gonna be truthful with each other, we gotta come clean: Most people would have done the *exact same thing*: The world's *full* of folks who, in the priest's or the Levite's place, would have left that poor, naked beaten man there, all alone, along the road, to die.

See, it's just not as simple as Jesus' little story seems to make it out. For one thing, the priest and Levite¹? They've got serious responsibilities back at the great Temple in Jerusalem. They can't risk becoming ritually unclean, because then they couldn't do their worship work. And everyone knows that one surefire way to get unclean is to touch or come near a dead body ... and, by all appearances, that man lying there in the road was *already dead!*

For another thing, come on! The priest and the Levite? They're just being prudent! Heck, in these parts, it's common for robbers to stage scenes to dupe folks into stopping to give help. And as soon as the sucker—*er*, the kindhearted soul!—kneels down, **in swoop** the bandits to rip his bag off his shoulder—or worse. Hey, cut the priest and the Levite some slack: They're actually pretty savvy to avoid falling for such an obvious trap!

And ... when you get right down to it ... isn't the *beaten man really* the one to blame here? Sakes alive! Everyone knows the road from Jerusalem down to Jericho is a den of knaves and thieves of every stripe. The man *knew* the risks. He played the odds, and he lost, pure and simple.

No, sir! By my way of thinking, almost any way you slice it, the priest and the Levite don't have much to answer for. They do what almost anyone *else* in their position would have done.

But then, here comes this cockamamie Samaritan to louse everything all up. Now, here's what you've got to know this about them Samaritans: Nobody likes 'em; no, ma'am, not one little bit. Yeah, they *say* they worship the same God we do, but *they* worship *their* God on Mt Gerizim, when *everyone* knows the only place to worship God is on Mt *Zion*, in Jerusalem. And they took our Scripture—God's holy word!—and cut out the part they didn't like. Blasphemy! Heresy! No, sir, I've never met a Samaritan I didn't wanna run outta town on a rail after ten minutes.²

And they're none too bright, neither! Just look at this Samaritan dope: stopping, all by himself—no companion; no lookout—to help some poor, naked sap lying in the road. It's a wonder this fool didn't get robbed or beaten or even *killed*.

And you know what's even *crazier*? That poor schlub this Samaritan stops to help? *He's a Judean*—one of *us*. They hate us as much as we hate them: Always have, always will. Why, it's a

¹ The Levites are a priestly class descended from Aaron. They serve in the great Temple a couple of times each year, in rotation. Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, is a Levite who is serving in the Temple when the angel Gabriel announces John's birth and mission to him (Lk 1:5-20).

² The line I'm taking here is the way the Judeans—'Jesus' people,' if you will—thought about Samaritans, in His time. They believed that the Samaritans had once been part of the People of Israel but broke away; for the Judeans, the only 'true' faith was their own. Modern scholars now largely reject this idea. *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, s.v. Samaritans.

dang fool thing: doing all this to help a sworn enemy: binding up his wounds; taking him to some inn; giving the innkeeper *two whole days' wages* to care for him ... and then, like a chump, promising to come back in a few days and pay whatever *more* his care costs. I mean, who *does* that? Sure, I'm all for helping out a *neighbor* in need. But I ain't never heard no Samaritan call a Judean a "neighbor" or vicey-versy.

I'll tell you what: I've heard this Jesus character tells some pretty farfetched tales, but this one's the farfetched-est. Judeans and Samaritans being *neighbors*? My foot! [**end character**]

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It's a funny thing, that word NEIGHBOR, isn't it? We hedge and pile it up with all sorts of caveats and conditions: someone whose home is near ours; someone we're friendly with; someone who asks, politely, for our help ("do you have a cup of sugar?") or, respectfully, offers it ("need a hand with that ladder?"); someone we have things in common with. Like the priest and the Levite, we're pretty good at making distinctions and erecting boundaries to 'un-NEIGHBOR' other folks ... at thinking up reasons why we can't—or shouldn't have to—acknowledge their needs.

The trouble is, these loopholes and qualifiers aren't *in* Jesus' teaching. When He affirms the duty to "love ... your neighbor as yourself," the word He uses³ literally means "whoever happens to be nearby": Anyone—*everyone!*—we see who needs some help ... who needs some mercy ... who needs some compassion ... who needs some *love* ... is our neighbor, Jesus tells us. For the Holy Spirit binds us *all* together, in Christ, and makes us *all* each others' neighbors. The Spirit calls us to have empathy and show *everyone* ↓ *whatever* mercy they may require ... *whatever* the reason.

The Spirit longs for us to see as our neighbor the young woman, pregnant and scared at age 13 or 14 ... and also her grandmother, who thinks every abortion is a sin. ¶The Spirit longs for us to see as our neighbor the mother who literally cannot afford, whether financially or emotionally, to raise another child ... and also her co-worker who hopes she'll have the baby and put it up for adoption. ¶The Spirit longs for us to see as our neighbors the couple shattered by prenatal test results that indicate a lifetime of pain and profound limitation ... and also their pastor who prays they will, nevertheless, see the pregnancy to term. ¶The Spirit longs for us to see as our neighbor the doctor or nurse or medical tech who now faces criminal punishment if she helps women as she's been trained to ... and also her colleague who's always refused to do so, on grounds of conscience. ¶The Spirit longs for us too see as our neighbor the woman who doesn't have the means to travel to a state where procedures remain legal ... and also the protesters picketing the entrance to the clinic.

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When we understand some of the historical and cultural context of the parable of the Good Samaritan, we realize he's not merely a nice guy, but actually quite the hero: Spotting a man in desperate need of mercy, the Samaritan sets aside all the risks to his own safety and his standing in the community. Overcoming the prejudice he's been so 'carefully taught'—that "the best Judean is a dead Judean," he stops ... he turns ... he stoops ... he cradles. He shows the man God's mercy simply because he's nearby—simply because he's a neighbor.

I know Jesus will forgive us if we, like the priest and the Levite, choose to cross to the other side and walk on by those whose opinions we find repugnant ... whose choices we cannot agree

³ *I.e.*, πλησίον (technically an adverb, but frequently used substantively (often with a definite article)).

with ... or whose lifestyles we cannot abide. But sooner or later we all must confront Jesus' uncomfortable question: "Who, do *you* think, was a neighbor to *them*?"



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