

Where Do You Draw the Line?

a sermon by J. Frederick Ball, OEF

Note: This sermon was first preached at Grace Presbyterian Church in Little Rock, Arkansas. The text is taken from a translation by biblical scholar Clarence Jordan:

One day a teacher of an adult Bible class got up and tested [Jesus] with this question: “Doctor, what does one do to be saved?”

Jesus replied, “What does the Bible say? How do you interpret it?”

The teacher answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your physical strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.”

“That is correct,” answered Jesus. “Make a habit of this and you’ll be saved.”

But the Sunday school teacher, trying to save face, asked, “But...er...but...just who *is* my neighbor?”

Then Jesus laid into him and said, “A man was going from Atlanta to Albany and some gangsters held him up. When they had robbed him of his wallet and brand-new suit, they beat him up and drove off in his car, leaving him unconscious on the shoulder of the highway.

“Now it just so happened that a white preacher was going down that same highway. When he saw the fellow he stepped on the gas and went scooting by.

“Shortly afterwards a white Gospel song leader came down the road, and when he saw what had happened, he too stepped on the gas.

“Then a black man traveling that way came upon the fellow, and what he saw moved him to tears. He stopped and bound up his wounds as best he could, drew some water from his water-jug to wipe away the blood and then laid him on the back seat. He drove on into Albany and took him to the hospital and said to the nurse, ‘You all take good care of this white man I found on the highway. Here’s the only two dollars I got, but you all keep account of what he owes, and if he can’t pay it, I’ll settle up with you when I make a pay-day.’

“Now if you had been the man held up by the gangsters, which of these three—the white preacher, the white song leader, or the black man—would you consider to have been your neighbor?”

The teacher of the Bible class said, “Why, of course, the...I mean, er...the one who treated me kindly.”

Jesus said, “Well, then, *you* get going and start living like that!”

—*Luke 10:25-37, The Cotton Patch Version of Luke and Acts: Jesus’ Doings and the Happenings, translated by Clarence Jordan. (New York: Association Press/A Koinonia Publication, 1969) Jordan also founded an interracial farm community in Georgia during the 1950s, called Koinonia Farms.*

Anybody could have spotted the Sunday School teacher in the crowd that day. With his dual-translation, a genuine-cowhide study Bible under his arm, along with a copy of the church’s daily devotional booklet for the July/August/September quarter. Listening to Jesus with a mixture of agreement and suspicion, arguing with Jesus internally as he heard Jesus’ words, the man seems to be waiting for a break in the lesson so he can speak. Jesus senses it, too.

We Are Always Looking to Set Limits on the Responsibilities of Faith

When the Sunday School teacher asks his question, we’re amazed. It seems rehearsed: *Doctor, what does one do to be saved?* It is a basic doctrinal question. Jesus carefully words his response, knowing that the

teacher is really eager to answer own question: *What does the Bible say?* The teacher answers. Jesus quickly says, *That is correct. Make a habit of that and you'll be saved.* Perhaps caught off guard, teacher comes closer to his real question the second time around, *Just who is my neighbor?*

It is, in essence, a question about limits. How far does this go? Whom does this love include? Family? Members of the Sunday School? In typical debate style, he wants to argue about the terms, the words—what do we *mean* by neighbor?

Isn't that our style as well, sometimes? We're not so crass as to ask, *Who is my neighbor?* We've heard the story too many times to be caught in that one. But we find other ways to tiptoe around and through the call of Gospel, hoping it can be accommodated to our lifestyle:

"Isn't it better to spend some family time together than to always be running to church for something?"

"Just what is a tithe, anyway? Do we tithe on gross or net?"

We are always looking for some way to draw the limits of the requirements of faith close enough that we know we can keep them and never be pressed too much.

"Do you have to be there every time doors open to be good church member?"

"Just how far do you take this give-to-poor stuff? There's such thing as too much of good thing."

The question really becomes, "How far do you go? Where do you draw the line with all this?"

Jesus Calls Us to Spontaneous Neighbor-Love

We listen as Jesus refocuses the question and tells his story. He will not answer the question "Who is my neighbor?" but he will answer the question behind the question: "How do I act as neighbor? How far do I go? Where do you draw the line?"

Now it just so happened that a white preacher was going down that same highway. As Jesus tells the story, it is more than simply chance that the preacher is there—it appears to be chance, but it is an example of interweaving of events by divine providence in order to accomplish something greater.

The Lord's timing and staging of life is always right for fulfillment of God's plan for us, and the people around us, if we will pay attention. We find ourselves in situations with people because of what God wants to do and say through us. The preacher was

on the road when the beaten man needed him.

Life is filled with serendipities. We are constantly meeting people who need us and whom we need. Life becomes exciting when we are free to give ourselves away in each relationship the Lord provides.

We should be amazed constantly by the miraculous way God weaves together the destiny of different individuals. Suddenly life takes on a new quality; people with needs are not a burden—they are gifts from God to allow us to give away what has been given to us. Availability to God, to be the expression of God's spontaneous love, is one purpose of our lives.

The preacher did not see his calling as a religious person in that light. Instead, what ran through his mind was probably something more like this: (1) I do not know the man; (2) I do not wish to get involved in any court proceedings; (3) I don't want to get blood on my new upholstery; (4) The man's lack of proper clothing would embarrass me upon my arrival in town; (5) And finally, brethren, a minister must never be late for worship services.

The song leader adds nothing new to the story, but is simply an exclamation point on fact of preacher's fear of getting involved. What his particular thoughts were we'll never know, but being a fine musician, as he whizzed past he might have even been whistling, "Brighten the corner where you are."

Perhaps we should not be so hard on these ecclesiastical figures; after all, in Jesus' day their passing by would not have been a surprise to, nor would it likely be condemned by, Jesus' listeners.

The victim on the highway no doubt appeared to be dead, and they were forbidden by the Law from going where there was a dead body—even if it were one of their parents. The priest and Levite in the original setting simply represent the traditional way religious figures would deal with a situation like this.

Unfortunately, in the mid-20th century setting of the Cotton Patch Version, the white preacher and the white gospel song leader also represent the traditional way far too many religious figures would deal with a similar situation today.

The story calls us beyond *understanding* what faith requires and invites us to *do* what faith requires. Twice Jesus says, "Act on what you know."

As Will Campbell, that radical, whiskey-drinking Tennessee Baptist who calls himself a "bootleg preacher" has said, "Discipleship is more important than theology." Over and over the New Testament stories about Jesus underscore the fact that *right living* is more important than *right thinking*.

The Gospel Call Is to Break Down Every Barrier Between Neighbors

We have domesticated this Gospel story—tamed it beyond impact so that the phrase *Good Samaritan* simply means a do-gooder of one kind or another. We must not miss the fact that the Samaritan was really a despised person among Jews in the first century.

Clarence Jordan's translation captures this idea well when he reflects the tension between the races in the South—a tension which is unfortunately *not* limited to rural Georgia of 50 years ago. To the lawyers, to the Jews in the audience, there was no misunderstanding at all—after all, it was a Samaritan village that had just refused hospitality to Jesus and his crew, upon whom James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven. They were half-breeds. They refused to participate in the restoration of Jerusalem and they had aided Syrian leaders in wars against the Jews.

In the Cotton Patch Version of today's account, the Sunday School teacher is caught in the racial prejudice of his day. How easy it is to become trapped into cultural patterns of contempt and suspicion, learned and passed down from generation to generation!

I mentioned Will Campbell earlier. You may know that he was here in Little Rock that day in 1957 when the first attempt was made to integrate Little Rock schools.

As the Little Rock Nine made their way through the crowds to the guarded doors of the high school, there walked Will, holding the hand of a little black girl and walking with the group. Among liberal-thinking Christians, Campbell has become an icon, and he attracts those who want to be his disciples.

Once a priest in New York phoned Campbell and said he wanted to come down south and join Campbell's ministry because he felt called to do something important with his life.

"Where are you now?" Campbell asked.

"I'm at a pay phone in Newark."

"Is it one of those glass booths?"

"Yes, it is," said the puzzled priest.

"Are there any people out there, or are the streets deserted?"

"There are lots of people."

"Well, son," said Campbell, "that's your ministry. Now go to it."

There is a temptation to position ourselves, even as we go about serving. It is the temptation to romanticize discipleship, to follow the *avant garde* in

ministering to the fashionable victims. Campbell found a unique and often-criticized role in ministering to members of the Ku Klux Klan, much to the embarrassment and consternation of his white liberal friends. But he saw in the "Kluxer," as he calls the Ku Klux Klan, someone who needed the transforming power of God.

A few years ago Will was invited to Austin, Texas, to speak at the installation of a young Baptist preacher. There, preaching before a crowd full of clergy, the passage he chose was from Matthew 25, the story of the sheep and goat judgment. Remember the line? *Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these...*

The question he posed that day was, "Who are the least of these?" It was a question every person has to answer for himself or herself, so Campbell cast back over his own life for the answer.

No, the least of these, he finally said, when he had them completely bound and gagged in the Christian tradition, "are you, my fellow Southern Baptist ministers. You are the only group I feel superior to. Jesus died for this: that I might be reconciled unto you."

We laugh. Until we realize that had Will Campbell been confronting us with the Gospel message, we might well have been the butt of his story-telling. *We* are those whom Christ died to reconcile to God. We, as much as anyone, are among the least.

Once we fully and truly recognize that—recognize *our* great need for grace, for Gospel, for love, for acceptance—we will no longer have questions about whether anyone else should be included, welcomed, or kissed in the name of Jesus. And we will no longer be drawing lines to keep our ministry from going forth to any group *or* to keep any group from coming in to be fully part of this family.

Where do you draw the line? Hear the Good News: God has already drawn it—a long straight line by which Christ came to be one of us, the divine intersecting with the human. The point at which those two lines meet is the Cross. It has made all the difference.

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