

A few years ago,  
between living in our old house in North Branford and  
our present house down the street here,  
my family squeezed into an apartment right off of Route 5 in North Haven.  
It was an open secret that on Saturday nights  
our son Cory would often slip out the back slider  
with whatever friend he happened to have over.  
Being middle schoolers at the time,  
I guess it was something of a thrill to head off after dark by themselves  
to go to the nearby McDonalds or Walgreens  
for snacks not up to mom's standards.  
This was a non-event for several weeks until  
one night we got a knock at the door,  
which my husband opened to find our son and his friend  
accompanied by North Haven's finest.

Yes, a police officer had picked up my son and his friend  
for walking down the street eating junk food.  
The officer was polite and professional.  
But I couldn't help noticing that this was the one and only time  
this happened all summer.

What was the difference between this friend and all the others?  
They were all middle school, all boys and mostly  
attended the same private school.  
The difference that night when the police picked them up?  
Maybe you guessed. *That friend was African-American.*

My son, even at that young and sheltered point in life,  
sadly realized that there was a difference between  
how he and his dear friend were perceived by the world.  
He realized that he had some unfair advantage in life simply by being born white.

You see, when we hear the phrase "Black Lives Matter",  
it's not to suggest that black lives matter any more than others,  
but to point out that they matter at all.

And when we hear the phrase, "Blue Lives Matter",

well, of course they do.  
They're human lives black, white, yellow and brown  
who earn the right to wear those blue uniforms for the benefit of us all.

We know that it has been an excruciatingly heart-wrenching week  
in which two young black men were killed by white police officers  
in Baton Rouge and a suburb of St. Paul,  
and five white Dallas police officers were killed by a deranged black man  
(able to access military-grade weapons)  
while doing their job protecting citizens assembled for peaceful, interracial protests,  
one of many taking place (mostly without incident)  
across our nation that night.

Even with all this,  
it seems to me that one of the most heart-breaking aspects of this sad saga  
is the intimation that we must somehow choose sides  
between who matters most,  
which loss of life is more tragic.

Nothing, but nothing is further from the Gospel  
than this *shameful false choice*.

Today's Gospel tells us this plainly – but any Gospel lesson would do the same.  
It's just that this week this message happens to come in the form  
we call "the parable of the good Samaritan."

One of the ironies is that Jesus' original audience  
would consider Samaritans anything *but* good.  
In fact, Samaritans were considered the worst of the worse.  
The enmity between them and the Jews ran deep and long.  
You may recall that in the previous chapter  
Jesus' disciples James and John had offered to  
"command fire" to rain down upon a Samaritan village.  
The Jews and Samaritans lived segregated from one another,  
which is what makes Jesus' forays into their territory so powerful.

But that's getting ahead of the story.  
It begins with a scholar of Jewish law asking Jesus how to inherit eternal life.  
Quite the rabbinical scholar himself,  
Jesus answers the question with a question,  
which the man answers perfectly by quoting

what we might call ‘the Great Commandment,’  
taken from the Hebrew books of Deuteronomy (6 & 30, read today) and Leviticus (19).

It’s loving God with everything you got –  
heart, soul, strength and mind;  
and putting that love into action in the life of your neighbor and yourself.

“And who is my neighbor?” that lawyer persists.  
I wonder if he realized that this is THE question  
Jesus came to answer?

And here’s where we get that famous parable about  
the poor guy who’s robbed, beaten and left in a ditch to die.  
The “nice” religious folks (like you and me?)  
can’t be bothered to stop and help.  
Maybe they didn’t want to get their hands dirty,  
or had had a bad day,  
or maybe they were just too busy to notice.  
Whatever the reason or excuse, the poor guy’s still stuck in the ditch, bleeding.

And then the Samaritan – the dreaded, defiled, dirty Samaritan – ambles by.  
Honestly, it might’ve been better to be left for dead  
than be rescued by him.  
Maybe it was that the Samaritan was accustomed to being ignored and  
beaten down himself  
that opened his eyes and heart to the suffering of the guy in the ditch.  
In any case he went all out, treating him like a brother instead of an enemy –  
bandaging his wounds, lavishing oil and wine upon him,  
giving up his own transportation to take him to an inn,  
all expenses paid,  
and promising to come back to check on his recovery.

The answer was surely a no-brainer when Jesus concludes the story by asking,  
“Which . . . do you think was a neighbor to the man  
who fell into the hands of robbers?”

Actually, it’s not quite as simple a question as you might think.  
Notice how Jesus uses the word “neighbor”.  
The lawyer had originally posed it as a noun, a label.  
But Jesus shifts it to more of an action word  
as if being a neighbor isn’t just who we are or where we happen to live,

but what we do and how we treat each another.

So who was a neighbor to the guy in the ditch?

Of course – the one who showed mercy.

The one who *did something*, to help.

The one who sacrificed and gave of himself.

I admit it was hard to follow the news this week.

Just when I was tempted to shut it off in despair,

I heard an interview with a woman in Dallas

talking about how terrified she was when those shots rang out

and the peaceful assembly suddenly felt more like a war zone.

She told how a police officer seemed to appear out of nowhere

to whisk her out of harm's way,

how he was willing to take a bullet for her.

In that instant they were neither black nor white, male nor female,

cop nor civilian, but *neighbors*.

I saw this same thing even more dramatically the next day

when I came upon a photograph (perhaps you've seen it too)

of a group of marchers, black and white,

shielding a baby stroller with their own bodies.

One was a black man with a small child on his back.

I have no idea who was safely cocooned

within that spontaneous human shield,

except that it was someone's baby and perhaps

a frantic parent gripping the handle of that stroller.

I don't know if they'd all come as a group or were total strangers.

But in that moment, when it counted, they were surely neighbors

taking a risk to show mercy, *do mercy*, together.

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is the ultimate neighbor.

In the tender mercy of our God, he chose to come to our neighborhood,

to take our humble flesh and dwell among us.

To show us the face of God in all our neighbors.

Jesus lived, died and rose again

to bring us into new and abundant life,

to break down the walls that divide us (as it says in today's epistle to the Colossians),

and show us how to live with and love all our neighbors

with everything we've got.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, my friends and my neighbors,  
it is urgent  
that we go and do likewise.

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