

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

July 10, 2016

Carroll Anne Sheppard; Licensed Preacher, Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

The motto of the University of Pennsylvania is: *Leges sine moribus vanae* ; or, in English, *Laws without morals are useless*. Perhaps this went past me when I was in college, but now I am grateful for this insight – and especially today, when we meet once again the parable of the Good Samaritan. We have heard this parable so many times. In our heads it goes something like this: the first one was bad; the second one was bad; the third one, even though he was not expected to do good, did it. And Jesus thought the Samaritan was the good one, too. You know, that's fine. But like so many of Jesus' parables, I think he wants us to dig a lot deeper. "*Who is my neighbor?*"

During the last week or two we have celebrated our Independence Day and mourned the deaths of hundreds of people – in Turkey, in Baghdad, in Louisiana, in Minnesota, Dallas and in Philadelphia. It has become ever more impossible to regard these deaths as something other, something different than, our world. This nightmare of violence seems now to be our world, and we are all afraid –deeply afraid for ourselves, our families and our people. And friends, I admit that I am afraid for our country. Days past the celebration of our Independence and the belief in freedom with accountability that has marked our history, we approach Bastille Day on July 14<sup>th</sup>. And I ask myself, are we headed for the chaos of a country in the hands of mob rule and violence that feeds on itself?

When Jesus was asked: "Who is my neighbor?" he told a story about a member of a despised minority, a Samaritan. The people of Jesus' time lived in peace with their Samaritan neighbors because the Roman occupation oppressed and constrained both of them. But the Samaritans were an affront to fully observant Jews.

The Samaritans had not, according to the Temple authorities, completely rid themselves of old idolatrous ways, nor did they regard the Temple authorities as the be-all and end-all of religious guidance. So they were accounted as half-caste, somewhat embarrassing, not really quite God's people. And then Jesus tells his story about a man who had every reason to walk past and did not. Who do you think "was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

So we stop, and wonder. How by the grace of God was this Samaritan able to stop and notice a man from a people who despised him, lying half-dead along the side of the road, and then to care for him and bring him to a place of safety at his own expense? Is this simply a story about human decency? Or is this a wake-up call about what being a neighbor means?

If I may borrow the gerund verb form, “neighboring” is not just an adjective meaning “next to.” It is an active verb, meaning the on-going care for those who come within our personal space, and a sacred duty enshrined in the earliest Judaic Law as quoted by Jesus: ***“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”***

What does neighboring mean? Especially in an era when we “like” so many friends on social media, and know so many people through the Internet? Neighboring is apparently what did not happen all over our world this week. There were way too few stories about people loving others as they loved themselves.

When people, especially those charged with public safety and governance, or those who decide that their own rules win out over God’s love, decide to take human lives and cause human suffering, we see the point of Jesus’ parable all too clearly.

When refugees and those fleeing for their children’s lives from dangerous places, cannot find succor because of bureaucratic roadblocks, rather than sheer inability of access, we hear the story of the Good Samaritan with new ears. Every refugee family is the half-dead victim of whom Jesus speaks. And every Christian and Jew is morally obliged, according to Jesus, to care for them according to the ancient Law of Israel.

When those responsible for upholding the law become killers, we must ask them to examine their actions: Who is your neighbor?

When those responsible for upholding our laws are guarding and defending the right of other people to peacefully protest, and they themselves are shot and killed, we must ask our leaders to examine their actions: Who is your neighbor?

When the very laws themselves are not upholding or being founded on morals, and we realize they are indeed in vain, we must stop and ask ourselves: “Who is my neighbor?”

The old sense of “neighbor” as one who lives close by, is being challenged today, isn’t it? Are our Facebook Friends “neighbors?” What is our moral duty to them? What relationship do we have with those killed in Orlando or Kuala Lumpur? Our world seems

larger, even while we are in face-to-face contact with fewer and fewer people we would call friends.

Our country's laws were founded on a set of moral convictions that are outlined in our Declaration of Independence: *"That all people are created equal. That they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights: that among these are life, liberty and pursuit of happiness."* This is an 18<sup>th</sup> century expansion of the ancient Jewish testimony of morality: *"You shall love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

Notice that Jesus did not say we were to love our friends as ourselves. No – he said in the part of Luke's gospel we heard last week: "That's what even the tax collectors do." Instead he said, *"Love your neighbor as yourself."* We Jesus-followers are not "Friending"; we are "Neighboring." Yes we must learn to love as ourselves every mourning parent who has lost their child to gun violence and will not be silenced, and every child who has been robbed of a parent through violence on our streets.

And this is perhaps the hardest -- that you shall love your enemies, and do good to those who hate you: the suicide bomber who has forgotten who his or her neighbor is; the sources of terroristic violence; those caught in the sickening addiction to gun violence on the streets of our city. We must learn how to love them or that violence will triumph, and evil will overspread our land.

Friends, we know how to do this. We know how to stand together, and we must. Or as Abraham Lincoln said in his 1858 speech accepting the Republican nomination for Senator, and quoting the words of Jesus in Luke's next chapter:

"If we could first know *where* we are, and *whither* we are tending, we could then better judge *what* to do, and *how* to do it.

We are now far into the *fifth* year, since a policy was initiated, with the *avowed* object, and *confident* promise, of putting an end to slavery agitation.

Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only, *not ceased*, but has *constantly augmented*.

In *my* opinion, it *will* not cease, until a *crisis* shall have been reached, and passed.

**"A house divided against itself cannot stand."**

And so, this morning, we ask ourselves first: "Who is our neighbor?" What does the law of Love demand?"

*Amen.*