

Sermon: Who is my neighbor?

This sermon was delivered to Kokomo , Friends Meeting, Kokomo, IN, in October 2006 by Jackie Speicher, Field Staff of Right Sharing of World Resources.

How many of you watch the Jay Leno show? (Nobody!) Well, frankly, I don't either. I don't stay up that late. But I'm TOLD that on the Jay Leno show every once in a while he will send an interviewer out on the street to question people there about Bible stories and Bible characters, and one time not too long ago he sent someone out to ask people about the Good Samaritan.

The interviewer approached the man on the street and asked, "What do you know about the Good Samaritan?" The man sort of shrugged his shoulders and said, "Well, I think he was a man who did a good deed." Then the interviewer asked, "Do you know anything else about him?" and the man said, "Yeah, well, I think they named a hospital after him." Then, finally, the interviewer asked, "Well, do you know he is actually a character in the Bible?" The man shrugged his shoulders and said, "Oh, no, I wouldn't know anything about that!" Well, that's sad. And hopefully we know more about the parable than the man on the street.

The one that he mentioned is an old familiar one that we've heard often. But I suspect that often we still have the image of The Good Samaritan that we got when we were children—I imagine a number of you grew up with it as I did— and we saw that beautiful painting of a man in traveling clothes kneeling on the ground beside a wounded and bleeding man lying half-naked on the rocky road while the donkey stands to the side patiently waiting to carry the patient to the inn. Did you see that painting in your Sunday School class?

Well, I think that when we heard that story in Sunday School class we heard that the moral of the story was that we were supposed to help others. And usually we thought that meant we were supposed to help others like us. Like the little old lady who lives next door to us, or somebody in the Sunday School or the church, or, perhaps, some of the little kids that were in our school. And we were supposed to get a good, warm feeling out of helping others. But the fact of the matter is that is we looked at the history behind the story, the setting of Jesus' day, we would find out that that was not so! This is not one of those warm, fuzzy kinds of stories. In fact, it probably shocked Jesus' listeners to hear it. In fact, they may have felt insulted; they may have even felt repulsed by it. The reason for this was that Jesus was challenging beliefs about themselves and what was and was not their responsibility to others that they had held for a very, very long time!

It pushed and challenged them in ways that would change their lives if they really, really listened. And if we read the story today in the same way that Jesus' listeners first heard it, it should push and challenge us to the maximum. The history of that time tells us that

the Samaritans were “lapsed” Jews. They had broken a lot of the Mosaic laws of the Jewish temple, and the first one was that they had intermarried with their Gentile neighbors. They were no longer pure-blood Jews. In addition, they had the audacity to develop some of their own scriptures. And thirdly, and almost worst of all, was that they had decided that it was not necessary to go to Jerusalem to worship God. They felt they could worship God in their own country, and so they built their own temple. And they refused to pay the temple tax that all Jews had assessed against them to support the big, beautiful temple in Jerusalem . So, the Jewish authorities declared the Samaritans to be taboo and unclean. And what it meant to be unclean in those days was that you should not touch them, OR be touched by them.

And just think about the Good Samaritan story! If you were that Jew lying by the roadside and the Good Samaritan came along to save you, you might have wondered if you wouldn't rather die. The fact is, not only would the Good Samaritan have had to touch him in order to bathe his wounds and clean him up, but he would have had to HUG him, put his arms around him in order to put him on his donkey in order to take him off to the inn. And when they got to the inn, its quite likely they shared a room together as the Good Samaritan watched over him, and cared for him, and nursed him back to health. This would have been a humiliating experience, and yet, this was what Jesus was talking about.

The hostilities between the Jews and the Samaritans went back a long way and caused a lot of bad feeling among them. The Jews had been known several times to set fire to Samaritan crops because of injustices they felt that had suffered due to the Samaritans. That would have meant that the Samaritans would have been doomed to hunger in the coming months because their food crops were gone. The Jews in Jesus' area, up in Galilee, had to pass through Samaria when they went down to Jerusalem once a year to worship in the temple. And one time when they were passing through a riot broke out between the Samaritans and the Jews and a number of Jews were killed. Even though the Jews appealed to the Romans to punish the Samaritans, the Samaritans bribed the Romans and no one was punished. All this would have been in the memories of the people that Jesus was speaking to. All of that formed their images of the Samaritan who was giving help and the Jew who was receiving it.

Jesus' story was a major address. He said that loving our neighbor means loving the one who is most unlike us. It means loving the foreigner, the alien, or the stranger. It means loving someone whose religious beliefs are different than ours and who worships the Creator in a different way than we do.

The scripture says that the lawyer asked the questions in order to justify himself. Now sometimes we do this, don't we? We ask the question because we think the response is going to be, “Well, this is what you are supposed to do in that type of situation, and you have done it so well I just want to praise you for that!” Well, Jesus did not praise this lawyer for being a good Jew. Far from it! And no doubt the lawyer probably was a very

good Jew, that is to say he probably gave coins to the beggars who were ill and begged at the temple gates. He probably gave money, as every good Jew did, to the widows and the orphans who were very poor. And, yes, he probably followed all the rules of his Jewish faith as he understood them. But Jesus said all of that is not enough.

He said we are supposed to radically love, love as ourselves, not just those who are closest to us, not just those who are easiest to love, but, in fact, we are called to love ALL of God's children, AND we are called to alleviate ALL of the suffering and injustice that God's children experience in our world. And Jesus, over and over again, gave us in his own life, examples of what he meant by that. Repeatedly he reached out to the suffering and the needy in his society, even when it was against the Jewish laws to do so. He reached out to the outcasts, like the lepers whom he was not supposed to touch. When he healed a leper he touched the leper, not only touched the leper but put his arms around the leper. He reached out to other persons who were considered to be unclean simply because they were ill. He reached out to Gentiles. He reached out to the despised of his society who were the prostitutes, for instance, and the tax collectors. And he always gave compassion to the poor.

People flocked to Jesus by the thousands—our scriptures say that there were 5,000 there on the day of the miracle of the loaves and the fishes. They flocked to him because Jesus gave hope to the hopeless. And by his example he calls us to do the same today. So then, again, we must ask ourselves the question, “Who is my neighbor today?” “Who am I really responsible for in this world that I live in?”

The fact of the matter is that today we live in an interdependent global village. I would guess that some of you drank coffee or tea for breakfast this morning. It is quite likely that that coffee or tea came from Africa, or from India, or from South America. Perhaps you had fruit, like bananas, that likely came from South or Central or America. Or if you had kiwis they may have come from as far away as New Zealand. The gas that you put in your vehicle to get here probably came from the Middle East. And most likely some of the clothes that you are wearing today—the clothes and the shoes—have a label in them that says “Made in China” or Indonesia, or some other far-away country. Often, the people that made those clothes were working for pennies a day.

John Woolman was a well-known Quaker who traveled up and down the East Coast in the late 1600s and early 1700s campaigning amongst Quakers for an end to slavery. He said that we cannot allow poverty and physical hardship to exist because in it are the seeds of war. I believe that John Woolman would say in the kind of situation that we have today where people are being paid pennies a day to produce things for us in our wealthy land, those workers are actually our slaves. By our use of the products that they produce, we are actually responsible for them, too.

That is a very uncomfortable thought, and that is the kind of discomfort that Jesus caused when he told the story of the Good Samaritan. Like it or not, the people in other

countries of the world are our neighbors. And there are some sad facts about those neighbors of ours.

It has been said that if there were only 100 people in the world: • 67 of those would be poor (two thirds) • 50 of them would not have safe drinking water • 30 of them would be hungry or malnourished • And out of those 100 people, only 6 of them would be Americans and those 6 would have 33% of the entire income that exists in the world. . • If the hungry of the world were to line up out in front of the church, right out here, and that line were to go across the parking lot, down the street, out of town, and on to the coast, across the ocean, and around the world, it would encircle the world 25 times. • If the unemployed of the world were to start lining up out here, their line would encircle the globe 5 times, and one out of every 3 persons in that line would be from the developing world. • 40,000 children will die TODAY in the developing world because of preventable diseases because they cannot get the inoculations and the medicine that they need for simple, preventable things like diarrhea, measles, or polio. That's 15 million children a year!

Now there are two ways to see and hear these kinds of statistics. One way is to be overwhelmed, to be depressed and tired, and to doubt that anything can really make a difference in this world where there is so much suffering. But there is another way, and there is a better way, and that is the message that Jesus brought us. Jesus brought a message of hope. That is to believe that God is at work in the world right now changing the world through the efforts of God's people. That way is to believe the prophetic message of liberation and of wholeness, of justice and of peace, is being raised up and lived out in the world. And I know that you all here at First Friends of Kokomo believe the second way. I know that because I have had the opportunity in the last two days to visit with people from your congregation, and I have heard the stories of the work trips that you have taken to places like Belize and Jamaica and Cuba and Kenya . And I heard wonderful stories at the fall USFW conference that was held here yesterday and at the joint Indiana-Western Yearly Meeting USFW retreat that was held a couple of weeks ago—wonderful reports about what Quaker women are doing in countries like Africa where an orphanage has been established for children orphaned by AIDS—a wonderful orphanage and school that has been filled to the max. It was, I believe I heard, built for 175 students and they have 350 there now and they are now in the process of expanding it so they can take 600 children. Even then, it will only be making a dent in the needs of Kenyan children, but it IS making a dent, and those 600 children's lives will be changed forever because Christian brothers and sisters reached out to them.

I am always inspired when I hear the stories of Right sharing—wonderful success stories about the poorest of the poor—many widowed by AIDS in Africa or the Tsunami in India, many whose human and civil liberties are severely limited by the remnants of the caste system in India or by other unfair laws there and in Africa. These are women whose families were living lives devoid of hope until they received a small business loan

and business training thanks to Quakers like you who made that possible. Now they can feed their children, they have decent housing, they have decent clothing, and they can send their children to school, which is going to make all the difference in the world for those families. I had the opportunity to go to Guatemala to the annual meeting of the Friends World Committee for Consultation in March where I heard the wonderful story of two people, just TWO people, out in California who learned that many children in Central and South America cannot go to school because their families can't afford the books and the school uniforms needed to attend public school. And so they started a scholarship fund a number of years ago to help just two children to graduate from high school. They have now served almost 1,000 children and some of the first young people that they helped have now graduated and are going back to their hometowns and are helping to start businesses and to bring more income and better housing in so residents will not be so poor. One is now a national senator working to change laws that keep the poor down.

In Jesus' parable of the Judgment Day, he talked about the separation of the sheep and the goats. I find it very interesting that when it was decided who would get to go to heaven and who would not, the main criteria was not how religious people were. God did not ask the question, "How often did you pray?" "How often did you read the scriptures?" "How regularly did you attend worship?" The one criterion was: "How compassionate were you?" "How well did you do at feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, comforting the sick and visiting those in prison?" There is, indeed, a deeper meaning to the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus calls us in this story to reach out to those that we normally would not even think about helping—because they are out of sight, out of mind, or because we have prejudices against them: we believe that they are not like us. The story calls us to open our eyes and our ears to see where the suffering are crying out for help. And he calls us to have faith that the task is not, in fact, too big. I like the words of Paul who said, "Without God I can do nothing. But with God all things are possible." And that is indeed true for us today. The problems of our world are many, and they are great. But with God's help we can reach out to God's suffering children wherever they are and we can make a difference for them. Thanks be to God! Amen.