

Deuteronomy 6:1-9
Psalm 119:1-8
Hebrews 9:11-14
Mark 12:28-34

Sermon for October 31, 2021

THAT ANNOYING NEIGHBOR

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: The last will be first.

Let's begin with a thought experiment. Suppose I won a spiritual lottery, and as a grand prize, I was awarded a two week vacation in heaven. I spend the evening before my trip carefully packing my bags. I leave my winter coat in the closet, because I'm pretty sure it's going to be a moderate climate. I decide not to bring travelers checks or even extra cash, since presumably all my necessities will be provided for; but just to be safe, I include my toothbrush and make sure my phone is charged, because I know I'll be taking a lot of pictures. When I'm finally satisfied I'll have everything I need, I go to bed and, after a good night's sleep, I wake up and, sure enough, I'm standing in front of some pearly gates and a kindly looking old man with a long white beard is waving me through. "My name is Peter," he says. "But you can call me Rocky. Everybody up here does."

"Nice to meet you, Rocky," I say, as I walk past him and through the gates.

And what do I see? Well, I see a beautiful rolling green landscape with quaint little cottages scattered here and there. "Anyone in particular you'd like to visit while you're here?" Rocky says.

"Well, yes, in fact there is," I say. "Can you show me where Christianity lives?"

"Say again?"

"Christianity, you know. The Christian religion? Which cottage does it live in?"

Rocky looks a little confused. "I'm afraid we only have people up here," he says. "People live in those cottages."

"The Roman Empire doesn't have its own house?"

"No."

"The United States doesn't have a house?"

"Afraid not. We only have people here."

"How about the Algeo family? Does it have a house at least?"

At that question, Rocky brightens up a little. "Not exactly a house," he says, "but sort of a compound. Would you like to go there?"

"Absolutely," I say.

So Rocky picks me up in his arms and we fly away. (I forgot to mention he has wings.) After a pleasant flight, we land in a pretty little valley with a number of cottages fairly close together.

"Would you like me to make introductions?" Rocky says. "You might not recognize some of them."

And so we go from door to door. I'm reunited with my parents and grandparents and great-grandparents and great great grandparents, second third and fourth cousins, all sorts of relatives going back many hundreds of years. And when we've finally visited all the houses, I turn to Rocky and say, "That was great, so many wonderful people. But we've visited every house in the valley, and I still haven't met the Algeo family. Where does it live?"

Although he's too polite to say so, at this point Rocky is probably starting to think I've got play doh where my brain should be, because I apparently haven't understood the simplest and most basic thing about life, whether it's in heaven or on earth, viz. that all relationships are between real individuals.

Our language, because it uses so many abstract or general nouns, tends to hide this simple fact. When we say, for example, that the police are coming to arrest me, what we're pointing to is not some great blue beast named Police; we're referring to

that particular uniformed individual knocking on my door. If you subtract that individual officer, and then all the other individual officers, there is nothing left called the Police who could come after me. If we say my family is gathering at my house this year for Thanksgiving dinner, we mean a number of particular people are coming. If none of them shows up, there won't be someone or something else called Family to sit down at my dining room table.

And the same is true of God's family. God has relationship with actual human individuals, not with abstract or general nouns. God doesn't have a relationship with the Roman Empire, or the Catholic Church, or the nation of Israel, or the United States, or Orleans County, or the Algeos. That's why, in heaven, you will not find anything, any thing, anyone, corresponding to those general terms. All you will find is individual people, just like you, and each of those individuals, just like you, will have a unique, one-on-one relationship with God.

What does all this have to do with our gospel reading for today. Well, let's read it together, and then think about it.

Mark 12:28-34

In Luke's telling of this same episode, when Jesus has said that loving your neighbor is somehow intimately connected with loving God, the scribe then goes on to ask him who is your neighbor, because the Jews tended to think that only other Jews could be neighbors, and Jesus at that point gives the parable of the Good Samaritan. This parable is often interpreted as teaching that Jews can find neighbors among non-Jews, or that the Christian religion is to include all of humanity. But I think the teaching is much more specific than that.

We must always remember that Jesus did not come to save humanity: there is no such reality as 'humanity', any more than there is a reality called the police, or the United States, or the Algeos. Jesus came to save each and every individual human being, to reestablish God's relationship with each one of His children, to show the way to God to each one of us, to me and to you, and to help each one of us individually along the way.

His instruction always has us as his patient, me, or you, or that fellow standing over there.

When you go to see the doctor, you're not there to help with your neighbor's arthritis; you're there to receive treatment for your own. Jesus is the great physician

of our souls, that is, of my soul, and of your soul. Not the soul of the United States; not the soul of humanity; not the soul of the Algeo family. Those don't have souls.

When Jesus advises me to love my neighbors as myself, his primary concern is not my neighbors, it's me. The benefit that may or may not accrue to my neighbor because of my attitude towards them is contingent, and dependent on a large variety of circumstances; but the benefit accruing to me is certain: it is the solemn promise of God.

When you look at the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, one of the things that's striking about them is that each promises a reward, not to the world, but to the one who follows the instruction. Blessed are the meek. Why? Because they will be of greater use to others? No: because they will inherit the world. Blessed are the merciful. Why? Because they will benefit their neighbors? No: because they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart? Why? Because they will set an example for others? No: because they will see God.

Jesus did not come to make the world a more comfortable place, a place full of gadgets and spectacles for our entertainment, or a world of political fairness and social equity. He wasn't a social engineer, whether communist or capitalist. He didn't come to reform governments; he came to reestablish relationship between individuals and God: between me and God, between you and God.

And how does that apply in the particular Gospel passage we're considering this morning? It means that being the sort of person who loves her neighbor as herself *is* being someone with whom God can come into a comfortable relationship, it is being someone who will feel at home, at ease, at peace, in God's neighborhood.

And who is her neighbor? Is it humanity? Is it social justice? Is it an end to war? No, your neighbor is the person living next door. The person with whom you have actual human contact; the person who is a real part of your real human life. Jesus healed all those who crossed his path, those whom he met, those whom he knew, with whom he had a personal relationship.

And that is our assignment as well.

Should we, as Christians, therefore stop being social reformers, stop marching for racial equality or protesting against war and abortion, stop donating our time and money to support orphanages in the third world? Of course not. But what we must

never do is pursue those lofty and abstract goals while neglecting those children of God with whom God has populated our own neighborhood.

In this church, we preach the universal salvation of all; we preach that all God's children go to heaven. But we don't preach that all God's children will feel equally at home there, at least initially; because that's not what Christ teaches. We may very well be surprised to discover that those applauded during their lives for being great philanthropists, great social justice warriors, great champions of humanity, are in fact least in the Kingdom of heaven, because while loving humanity, they had no sympathy for the person next door. We may be surprised to discover that the first will be last and the last first in more ways than we anticipated.

And so this morning, our prayer, gracious God, is that we may come to love our friends as we love ourselves, that we may love our brothers and sisters as we love ourselves, that we may love our grocery clerk as we love ourselves, that we may love our annoying neighbor as we love ourselves, that we may love each other, here in this church, as we love ourselves, because Jesus loved those he knew as he loved himself, and we pray in his name.