

Sermon – Sunday, July 10, 2022

Rev. Randi

Last week, we talked about 70 disciples on a journey. This week we talk about one man on a journey alone. He is a Jewish man traveling alone from the Holy City, perched high up on the mountain, to Jericho, located on the Dead Sea. We don't know why he is going to Jericho, but to get there, he must travel 20 miles through the wilderness. As he travels alone, he is robbed, beaten, and left for dead. Those he most respects – those leaders in Jewish society – pass him by without helping. They don't want to make themselves unclean under Jewish purity laws. They don't have time to stop because they are late for an appointment. For whatever reason, they leave their fellow countryman to die.

Then along comes a Samaritan. Samaritans despised Jews, and Jews despised Samaritans. The Jews believed the Samaritans failed to keep the law of Moses. The man was also a trader. We know that the man was a trader because he had the wine, oil, and money. Traders were a particularly hated profession. So, a man of a despised race serving in a despised trade stops to help.

When Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, he changed the question the young man asked and called him up short. The man asked who his neighbor was. Instead, Jesus answers by telling a story that forces this expert in the law to admit that sometimes the one who acts most neighborly is the one you'd least expect to do so. Sometimes the kindest person comes from a group you've been taught to dislike. Imagine how the expert in the law felt when he realized that to inherit the kingdom of God, he needed to be meek and kind like the Samaritan, rather than following the rigidity of the Mosaic law. Loving our neighbors takes precedence over being on time for meetings or keeping ourselves clean. The Samaritan demonstrated that love, while the priest and the Levi did not.

We all know we should be kind. But sometimes, we let other things take precedence over stopping to care for a neighbor. Sometimes the more important and righteous we think we are, the less likely we are to take time to care for others. Yet, the reverse should be true. The more important and righteous we think we are, the more we need to take the time to be kind. Otherwise, we'll be brought up short when we talk to Jesus about our lives, just as the law expert was brought up short.

I grew up in the South in the '60s and early '70s. In the South, white people viewed each other as being respectable but tended to regard people of color as less so. My parents' generation, in particular, had grown up trusting and respecting white people but distrusting people of color. They were a product of their time. We had an extended family of people of Cherokee descent who was members of our church. I was friendly with the son, who was about my age, but my parents cautioned me about getting too friendly because they were so dark and looked black. In fact, one member of that Cherokee family had experienced a cross burning on his lawn because he married a white woman.

Both of my parents worked. My mother's job did not give paid sick leave, and family leave hadn't been invented then. So, when my father was diagnosed with lung cancer, finding transportation for him to chemotherapy and radiation treatments was difficult. My parents asked all the folks on their street—all white – for rides, but no one could commit. They had their own jobs and lives. My parents asked our relatives, but they also had their jobs. Finally, my parents mentioned the need at our church. The person who volunteered to take my father to every one of his appointments was the patriarch of that same Cherokee Indian family. Out of all the people we asked, the only one who was neighborly to my father was this dark-skinned man that we'd been afraid to get too close to. His kindness had caught us all up short, just as the kindness of the Samaritan trader caught the Jewish legal expert short.

Being kind to our neighbors is a part of the Greatest Commandment. If we claim to love God, we must be kind to everyone. If we're kind to everyone, we'll never be caught up short by those we think of as less trustworthy because we'll think of all people as trustworthy. We'll act as the Good Samaritan and our Native American friend did.

The novelist Kurt Vonnegut, who has been dubbed a Christ-loving atheist, sums up the essence of Christianity in the book "A Man Without a Country." A young American from Pittsburgh asks, "Please tell me it will all be OK." Vonnegut writes something like this. "Welcome to Earth, young man. It's hot in summer and cold in the winter. It's round and wet and crowded. At the outside, Joe, you've got about a hundred years here. There's only one rule that I know of: Joe, you've got to be kind."

Even atheists acknowledge the importance of loving and caring for our neighbors. For Christians, it's a part of our creed. Christianity derived from the love and kindness of Jesus, who gave His life for us.

For us, there's really only one rule that matters. Love God and love your neighbor. Brothers and sisters, we've got to be kind.