

Behold! “Those Persons” are Your Neighbors!

Gates Presbyterian Church

Sunday, July 15, In the Year of Our LORD, 2007

The Rev. Ralph S. English

Quotes printed on Worship Bulletin Cover:

If my heart is right with God, every human being is my neighbor.

Oswald Chambers

He who withhold but a pennyworth of worldly goods from his neighbor, knowing him to be in need of it, is a robber in the sight of God.

Meister Eckhart

Luke 10:25-37

Just having passed page 730 of the 1073 paperback edition of James Michener’s “Alaska,” I am struggling. I admit that my attention span is challenged by Michener’s lengthiness, but it is more than that. I am weary of reading of how humans mistreated other humans. My soul wants to cry. My reading of Michener’s tome has reached the beginning of the 20th century and how native peoples’ fishing rights were lost when companies convinced the powers in Washington D.C. to give large corporations exclusive rights to all of the land. Ignoring their status as fellow humans on this globe, native Alaskans were deprived of the basic right to fish for salmon where and as they had for centuries. Sadder still, in many instances, salmon were fished in some rivers to the point that no fish made it back to the place from which they came – meaning no future generations of fish – for anyone.

As I slog through “Alaska,” Sally is listening to one of Bill Bryson’s books on CD as she travels in her car to and from work and shopping. “In a Sunburned Country” is about Australia. Last week, Sally reached the point that Mr. Bryson related how well into the twentieth century it was legal for “Australians” to shoot aboriginal people – singly or in groups. In the 1930’s through 1950’s the children of aborigines were taken from their parents so that they might be properly educated. To any suggestion this was inhumane, the *official* government response was “aborigines don’t have human emotions,” ... that they will, in essence, like animals, not care or long remember their children. The suggestion that aborigines were humans – or neighbors – would have been preposterous.

Meanwhile, I was reading – and rereading – the quotes found on the first page of our worship bulletin and today’s Gospel Lesson from the tenth chapter of Luke – the great Commandment:

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.

That great two-part commandment is followed by Jesus’ definition of neighbor as expressed in the story of the Good Samaritan, the unexpected neighborly and loving behavior of a person from Samaria – the kingdom to the north. By this time in history, Samaritans are considered foreigners to if not enemies of the people of Judea. The story of the man who acted in a neighborly way is all the more poignant because of the behavior of the Levite and the Priest – two men of social and religious stature one would expect to behave in loving and supportive ways but were instead quick to pass by and ignore the robbed man.

As extreme are the illustrations from Michener's "Alaska" and Bryson's book about Australia, there are all too many examples of less than neighborly behavior in our world today. Indeed, while we might scratch our heads and wonder if perhaps the behavior of the human race is digressing rather than improving, we don't have to look far for examples of less than neighborly behavior, much of which is driven by the same motives that in worst case scenarios become prejudice, bias and the dehumanizing of other persons on this globe. We can point to the selfish conduct of nations and corporations and groups of persons until the proverbial "cows come home," but on occasion it behooves us to look in a mirror and determine whether we, at the core of our being, are any different. Does not the need for forgiveness and grace start with us?

An unfortunate case of less than neighborly behavior was announced this last week from the Vatican. Although not totally unexpected, Pope Benedict's edict that only Roman Catholics will know true salvation was anything but neighborly. Even though Mr. Ratzinger thinks he knows better the meaning of the Documents of Vatican Two, those of us with copies of the documents beg to differ and think the Pope has set ecumenical relations back fifty years. A report in today's Reuter's News Service quotes the Head of Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Shenouda III in a harsh criticism of Pope Benedict.:

Shenouda told the state-run daily Al-Ahram: "The man (Pope Benedict) makes enemies every time. In his first statements a few months back, he lost all the Muslims. And now this time, he lost a lot of the Christian denominations because he has begun to err against Christians themselves."

The Vatican said on Tuesday that Christian denominations outside Roman Catholicism were not full churches of Jesus Christ, drawing the ire of a number of Protestant groups, who said it would hurt dialogue.

Shenouda attributed the statement to Catholic pride as though "they were the only Christians in the world."

"We're not opposed to Catholics having pride in their church, but that doesn't mean that every church that doesn't join them isn't a church."

Three days ago, I received an e-mail from Gina Downer. Many of you remember Gina and George, who worshipped with us for a couple of years before they moved to the east side of the city to be closer to their daughters, sons-in-law and grandchildren. I asked her if I could read part of her e-mail, omitting any reference to Gina and George. She replied that I was to read this to you *with* attribution.

Hi Ralph,

I need to write to you because George and I thought of you after reading Pope Benedict's remarks in yesterday's paper.

On behalf of George and myself and a LARGE number of liberal Roman Catholics, we apologize for the Pope's insensitivity and ignorance. I don't know what to say except that I am embarrassed by his remarks for the past two weeks. ... I hope you and the congregation of Gates Presbyterian Church can forgive the leader of the Roman Catholic Church. He doesn't speak for all of us. WWJD! [What Would Jesus Do!] Jesus welcomed all ... I don't

know why the Pope doesn't. I guess all we can do is pray that the Holy Spirit can breathe newness into his heart and soul.

We are active at St. Mary's Church-downtown... we are both singing in the choir. I hope you are well and enjoying the summer.

Blessings and Peace, Gina

When Sally and I were in Alaska visiting Melissa, I had a long conversation with my daughter's supervisor. A couple of years older than Melissa, this young lady is leaving the Air Force in the near future. She wants to go to Afghanistan to work with the people as she believes the solution in that part of the world is a matter of social and economic, not military science. The U.S. Army has a unit in Afghanistan that is working on that very issue (contrary to the belief that the Army only practices military science). The Army has offered this woman opportunity to continue as an officer, and she would be willing to do so except the Army will not let her sign up for a set period of time or promise she will always work in civil affairs. So, she hopes to go as a civilian. What made the discussion intriguing is that I was speaking to a military officer who, like many other active and retired officers I know, realize that in Iraq and Afghanistan, a singularly military solution is simply not going to work, that to get peoples of the Middle East to live as neighbors means a different approach than one which is doing the opposite and *enabling* tribal conflict in Afghanistan that finds a parallel in sectarian violence among Kurds, Shiite and Sunni in Iraq.

In my response to Gina Downer's e-mail, I told her how the Gospel reading for today, the one that will be read in *every* Roman Catholic Church in this country today, ... that the reading was about Jesus' definition of neighbor as found in the tenth chapter of Luke. I told her a little of Sally's read of Bryson's book and mine of Michener's. In her response, she added words all of us might echo today:

I am shocked by how human beings treat other human beings in this world. What makes people think they are better than other people?

There is the rub. One can't look at other humans and think of them as neighbors if one is determined to classify them so as to think yourself better than they. And, as much as we may wish and pray that all the world's people recognize as neighbor every other soul on this globe, there all too many circumstances where people look upon others as less than fully human – and thereby justify their mistreatment, their dehumanization – if not their elimination.

In Australia, the aboriginal people were seen and defined as vermin. Native Americans were defined as such in all too many official documents of the colonial powers. The enslavement of Africans in the New World underscored the dehumanization that was official policy. Jews were defined as less than human by the powers of the Third Reich as were Tutsis by Hutus in more recent memory in Rwanda. Unfortunately, the mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Graib prison is symptomatic of how all too many people of our country consider all Iraqis as less deserving of recognition as humans – much less as a neighbor.

How slippery a slope – from talk of love (or lack thereof) or neighbor to mistreatment if not abuse of others! Yet, in Jesus' definition of neighbor, he used a Samaritan as his point of reference. One thousand years earlier, Samaritans and Judeans were *one* people. Samaria was the capital of a unified Israel under Saul and was the second most important city after David

moved the capital to Jerusalem. After Solomon's death, the nation divided in two – Israel to the north with Samaria as its capital and Judea to the south with Jerusalem as its seat of government. By Jesus' time, all communication between the peoples of the north and those of the south had not only ceased. It had degenerated to downright dislike. Jews did not speak to Samaritans. Samaritans who visited from the north were treated as less than second-class citizens. Yet, in the story, the Levite and the Priest ignored the plight of the man who had been mugged, and it was the Samaritan who bound up the man's wounds, conveyed him to a place of safety and promised to return to make sure the now recovering man was all right and his needs provided.

Like the Priest who was far less than neighborly, the highest priest of the Roman Catholic Church is the one who in the year of our LORD, 2007, is walking and talking as though all too many persons on this globe are not of his ilk. Like the Levite who was far less than neighborly, the greatest temporal power on earth, with the means to bring social and economic justice to the peoples of the world, the United States instead wields military might as though that is the only tool for peace – and then we wonder why other peoples of the world pick up the pace in an arms race that seems to have no end. Yes, we are also one of the greatest contributors to A.I.D.S. research and economic development around the world – but what of the unemployed, hungry, homeless, disease-ridden, justice-seeking persons on this globe and right here in this country? If we can mobilize for combat in far off places, could we not, if we really wanted to be the neighbors God through Christ calls us to be ... would we not combat many of the world's social ills and participate in the kinds of battles we can actually win?

As Christians, we start by challenging the person who looks back in the mirror. Are we as neighborly as God calls us to be? But we are also called to challenge the powers-that-be of this world. It is beyond me how Pope Benedict thinks he is not going to be challenged – from every corner of the globe. But is it not time to challenge the politics that build on our fears instead of our hopes, that considers military solutions primary, and wants to paint all too many persons as our enemies? Are there “bad people” out there, determined to undo us? Yes! And the solutions are far more complicated than “if we only loved them, they would come around.” We, like Jesus the Christ, are not naive. We are, however, blessed of a God who expects us to look for better ways to solve the world's ills than to ratchet up the acts of retribution and revenge – and instead find ways to be all the more encompassing, all the more loving, and all the more willing to look at every person on this globe as more than just another human – but as our neighbor.

Amen.