

CONNECT! SUNDAY REFLECTION

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time | For Sunday, July 14th, 2019

Who Is My Neighbor?

Rev. Mark Suslenko

Deuteronomy 30:10-14

Colossians 1:15-20

Luke 10:25-37



Through his Canticle of the Sun, St. Francis reminds us that the essence and beauty of God emanate from within God's creation and are not imposed upon it. All created things are mirrors of the Divine that reflect back to the viewer of the life and love that is its source. The author of the Book of Deuteronomy provides a glimpse of this as well when he discusses the "command of the Lord." "It is something very near to you," the author says, "already in your mouths and in your hearts; you have only to carry it out." The very essence of God, His command, is already within us. It is not our task to "put it there" or "welcome it in" because it already exists there. This is a profound reality to ponder and the primary reason Jesus is so insistent that we keep love of God and neighbor bound together as one. They cannot be separated because they are essentially and intentionally the same.

We listen to this weekend's Gospel that details Jesus' commandment on love. This is not a new teaching by any stretch. However, it is given a new twist when love of neighbor is elevated to the same status as love of God. The parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us that God is the master reverser of roles. Those hearing this story for the first time would have certainly been caught off guard when they heard that the Samaritan is the hero. Those whom we least expect are the ones who often do the will of God the most. Saint or sinner, we all receive the same abundance of God's mercy. God's mercy, as with God's love, is at the core of who we are. We cannot merit it, increase it, or escape it. It is simply there.

All of creation is on fire with God's presence. St. Francis knew this so very well. It is for this reason that he shared such an intimate connection with all people and things and shared with them a familiar relationship. It was his firm conviction in and knowledge of God's love within that gave him the courage to persevere, a reason to hope, a cause for faith, and an inexhaustible ability to love. Francis knew exactly who his neighbor was and responded without hesitation.

We do not find our neighbors in philosophies and theories. The questions we ask about situations involving our neighbor — whether it be homelessness, immigration, sustainable work, human dignity, and the like — must

always be framed in light of what is best for them, not what benefits the one with the power to provide a proper response. This is the only way that barriers preventing proper and appropriate responses can be removed.

Our neighbor's face is different for each one of us depending upon our station in life. It can be our family members, coworkers, bosses, pastors, associates, people living on our street or on the road, and folks in the supermarket with us, those who want to hurt us, our enemies, and those who think they can control us. They are all our neighbors. How do you respond to them?

As important as loving our neighbor is to accomplishing God's work, it cannot stop there. Stopping there leads us to a well-camouflaged form of relativism that has the Golden Rule at its base and thus appears acceptable. The task of discipleship is not just about bringing love to my neighbor both in thought, word, and deed but in seeing the love that is at their source and falling in love with the author of love: God himself. This relationship that I then develop with God becomes my anchor and benchmark. In this way, we have the litmus test we need for making sure that we are focused and on track with all of our relationships.

God's Word as it is revealed through Sacred Scripture and safeguarded in the teachings of the Church are the ways our relationship with God's command stays fresh and accessible. Doing loving deeds for people isn't enough, nor is living life as if there are no guidelines, benchmarks, or common goals to achieve. Living God's commandment does not find its expression in an "if it feels good do it" or "if it's where I am accept it" philosophy of life. It is quite the contrary. God has some definite ideas in mind for us and for the world. We need to figure out what those are while keeping faithful to both Scripture and tradition that is the foundation of our faith. The beatitudes, justice, and mercy are all essential components.

All that being said, loving our neighbor is not meant to be easy. It is messy, confusing, conflicting, sticky, and uncertain. What we often discern to be the best for the person in front of us may not actually be what is most beneficial at the end of the day. We bring ourselves dimly through life, relying solely on the light of Christ to enlighten our way. When we need guidance, support, and direction, the Lord and the community of the church are always there. May we always listen to new and more effective ways we can listen and respond to the needs of our neighbor. St. Francis of Assisi, be our inspiration and our guide!

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PRAYER

Praised be You my Lord with all Your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour,
Of You Most High, he bears the likeness.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
In the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,
And fair and stormy, all weather's moods,
by which You cherish all that You have made.
Praised be You my Lord through Sister Water,
So useful, humble, precious and pure.
Praised be You my Lord through Brother Fire,
through whom You light the night and he is beautiful an
playful and robust and strong.

*— from "Canticle of Brother Sun and Sister Moon"
of St. Francis of Assisi"*