

INSIDERS, OUTSIDERS OR JUST NEIGHBORS?

July 4, 2021

He has told you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (NIV) Micah 6:8

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ He answered, ‘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.’ And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’ Luke 10:25-37

LOVE OF COUNTRY

Many years ago I heard Cleon Flanigan give what I thought was the best 4th of July sermon ever given in Cuchara Chapel. Soon after, I did what every conscientious minister does upon hearing a great sermon—I asked for a copy. This morning I want to share the beginning of that sermon. It is a bit of prose that Cleon wrote about the beauty of our country. If you listen carefully you may also see on your mind’s wall colorful images from this beautiful Valley.

As far as I can see, I have seen wheat waving in the wind, corn as high as an elephant’s eye, and cotton fields as white as snow. I’ve seen giant truck farms growing multiple varieties of vegetables. I’ve seen beef cattle on ranches, brown cows on green pastures giving white milk, and hogs and sheep and goats and chickens on their farms. I’ve caught fish in the oceans, lakes, rivers, and small mountain streams. I thank God for the wonderful way that he has provided for the human kind of creation.

I have hiked the forest trails through stands of aspens, pines, spruces, firs, sweet gums, and oaks. I’ve seen deer, bear, and mountain lions; foxes, coyotes, and wolves; racoons, skunks, squirrels, and rabbits to mention a few. I’ve seen birds from the tiniest finches and colorful warblers to the elegant and powerful hawks and eagles. I have seen amazingly beautiful courting dances of animals and birds charming their would-be mates. Wow! What a variety of life that only God could imagine.

AMERICA IS INDEED A BEAUTIFUL LAND.

It is part of the reason we love our country—from the redwood forest to the Gulf stream waters from amber waves of grain to purple mountain majesties. But perhaps what we love most about our country, what is truly unique, is not its landscape, but its ideals and opportunities. We who inhabit this great land are truly blessed in so many ways.

WE ENJOY SO MANY FREEDOMS:

- Freedom to worship, to speak our minds, to decide where to live, to vote our convictions and political stances, to choose our mates, to drive our cars.
- Freedom from absolute abuse of power: checks and balances in government so that no one person or group can have ultimate power.

WE HAVE COUNTLESS OPPORTUNITIES:

- To be educated, to choose our professions, to follow our dreams.
- To decide what flavor of ice cream we want to buy at Charlie’s Grocery Store.
- To have possible for us all the basic elements of living:
Food, water, shelter, clothing, health care

WE ENJOY INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS:

- Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness
- The right of trial, legal representation, even if poor.
- The right to free speech, the right to assemble.

OUR DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE makes it clear that these rights are directly linked to God:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among them are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

A TIME TO CONFESS

On this Fourth of July, we would do well not only to celebrate our accomplishments, but also to confess that we have not always lived up to these high ideals.

- Early on we as a nation committed terrible atrocities toward the American Indians whose land we confiscated.
- We permitted slavery to invade our shores and become a staple of our national economy.
- Inequities remained even after slavery was abolished.
- After the attack on Pearl Harbor, we incarcerated countless Japanese Americans, allowing their “outsider” heritage to *revoke* their citizenship.
- During that same time we refused immigration to Jews displaced by the war.

Even unto this day we have failed as a nation to always show justice without prejudice.

- Can you give any examples from your memory?
- Just as important, can you name incidents in your own history where you failed to show justice and compassion to all people?

But even though as a country we have fallen short of our high ideals, there remains so much to celebrate.

- Freedom still abounds here in this land.
- Fulfilling one’s dreams is still possible, no matter how difficult.
- Justice, though fragile, is still our national goal and our highest ideal.

As Martin Luther King once said:

We ain’t what we oughta be. We ain’t what we want to be.

We ain’t what we gonna be. But thank God we ain’t what we was.

One day hopefully we may truly have liberty and justice for all.

LOVE OF CUCHARA

We gather here in the Chapel today on this Fourth of July not only celebrate our love of this country but also our love of this valley. In this valley many of us have celebrated countless 4th of July parades. They are indeed wonderful slices of Americana, especially with the imaginative appearances of Diane Broce in disguise!

On this Fourth of July we can remember how blessed we are to live in this country and how blessed we are to be able to enjoy this little piece of heaven, with all its natural beauty.

CONFESSION

I have a confession to make. I used to think the best part of this place was its natural surroundings. They are fantastic are they not? Since 1972 while serving as a full-time minister, I came here for only one or two weeks. What I wanted and needed was to crash, to rest, to renew—not to socialize. I did come to Chapel, and to potluck dinners at the rec hall, but otherwise, we pretty much stayed to ourselves.

But after retiring, I was able to spend 3 months instead of two weeks. What a difference! Then I would be able to have time for parties and bingo and hikes, and tennis, and visiting with neighbors and friends.

It was then that I discovered that the best part of Cuchara is not the natural surroundings.

The best part of Cuchara is the people.

AN INVITATION TO DROP BY

Dennis Schurter and I both had ministries in Denton, Texas—he as chaplain to Denton State School and I as senior pastor of First United Methodist Church. One summer we happened to meet at the chiropractor's office. As we talked we learned that both of us were soon on our way to Colorado. Dennis and his wife Sandy were on their way to several stops and my wife and I were headed for a two-week stay at Cuchara. I told Dennis if they drove by that we would give them a tour of the area. Sure enough, they dropped by on their way back to Denton and we gave them a tour of the area including downtown Cuchara, the ski resort and Bear and Blue Lakes. They loved the valley immediately.

In summing up the visit and what would follow one could simply say,

“They came. They saw. They came again. They bought. The rest is history.”

How glad I am that I invited them to drop by! What an addition to the valley! Now these once outsiders are on their way to becoming true insiders.

OUTSIDERS or INSIDERS/ OLD TIMERS or NEWCOMERS

Are you an *outsider* or *insider*? Are you an *old-timer* or a *newcomer* to the valley?

DINNER AND A VISIT

Several years ago my first wife and I were invited for dinner by some friends who had a cabin in Spanish Peaks. They were not only friends in the valley; they were also parishioners in my church in Dallas.

After supper, the conversation evolved into talking about all the “newcomers” to the valley. The hostess began complaining that the *outsiders* were changing the valley. She was not a fan of the new ski area and all the influx of people it was causing.

So you don't like all these “newcomers” coming to the valley? They are “outsiders,” right?

That's right, she said, (taking my bait) I like it the way it used to be.

Taking a risk that I might offend my hostess and my church member, I said to her:

You know, to me, with my family's roots going back to 1950, you're the “newcomer;” you're the “outsider.”

Upon hearing my remark, she was quiet for a second or two. I smiled. She smiled and then she changed the subject completely.

OUR COUNTRY TODAY

In our country today there is much talk of *outsiders* and *insiders*, *old timers* and *newcomers*, *citizens* and *immigrants*. When I hear such talk I have to wonder if some of my American Indians friends are tempted to say to us:

No, *you* are the *newcomers*. *You* are the *outsiders* who just claim to be *insiders* now.

I wonder, on hearing this, will we be humbled as my parishioner was? Will we be open to new people? Will we insist that things stay the way they are? Will we insist that we are the insiders now; others are the outsiders?

Maybe Cuchara can teach our country a new kind of unity, a unity in the midst of differences. Sure, we have different areas in the valley. But we are one valley, not separate developments. Our friendships here have no boundaries.

What unites us is our love of this place and its people.

- We do not share the same backgrounds.
- We do not embrace the same politics.
- We do not share the same religious practices.
- We are Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Catholics, Episcopalians, Church of Christ, whatever branch of the Christian Church.

Even so, we can all gather in this charming rustic chapel, worship the same Loving God, and share the same Faith.

In Cuchara what *unites* us (this place) is stronger than what *divides* us.

In Cuchara we all can become insiders, or at least feel that way.

Outsider and *insider*, *old timer* and *newcomer* play a much smaller role in the Valley.

On this Fourth of July perhaps it is time to give up the labels of *outsider* and *insider*. Maybe we need a new word to describe citizen or patriot.

OUR NEW TESTAMENT TEXT

Our scripture today has such a word: neighbor.

In the reading of our text you heard the lawyer ask Jesus

What are we to do to inherit eternal life?

Jesus put the question back to him. *What do you say?*

The man answered with 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.

Then the lawyer added a Scripture verse from Leviticus:

And your neighbor as yourself.

You have given the right answer, Jesus told him. (The lawyer's theology was fine.)

But then Jesus added, *Do this and you will live.* (Just having correct theology is never enough.)

The lawyer should have stopped there, while he was ahead, but he could not resist asking Jesus,

"And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus then tells the parable of the Good Samaritan.

THE PLOT

The plot of the story is simple.

- A man is robbed and severely beaten and left by the side of the road.
- Three people will discover him but only one will have compassion on him.
- The three characters are a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan.

If the lawyer had known in advance both the plot and the characters of the story, he would have immediately known who the hero would be.

THE PRIEST

It would be the priest, the man of God. (You know how loving we preachers are, right?)

Wrong. Not the priest. He passed by.

THE LEVITE

Well, okay. Then it must be the Levite who will come to the injured man's aid.

- Levites are so religious. They followed the law strictly.
 - Surely, it would be the Levite who would render aid.
- Wrong. The Levite would also pass by on the other side.

THE SAMARITAN

The lawyer would have to believe there is some mistake.

The Samaritan could not be the hero. He is an outsider.

Samaritans, as you may know, were hated by the Jews—so much so that they would cross the Jordan river rather than travel through Samaria.

- The Samaritans had their own Temple, not the one in Jerusalem.
- They were not as strict in observance of the Law.
- And they had intermarried with the Assyrians who were outside the faith.

But Jesus tells the story and makes the Samaritan the hero. At the end of the story Jesus wanted to know if the lawyer understood. He asked, *Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?*

The lawyer could not even say the word, ‘Samaritan.’

- He could not bring himself to say that a Samaritan was the hero of Jesus’ story.
- Since he could not say the word he simply described his behavior: *The one who showed him mercy!*

Do any of you here hate Samaritans? I didn’t think so. So if Jesus chose a new hero to his parable what group would we prefer he did not choose? (Got a group in mind?) If Jesus then asked us to name the one who was the new hero for his revised parable, could we speak the name of the group or would we just say like the lawyer, “The one who showed mercy”?

BEING A GOOD NEIGHBOR

You see, being a neighbor has nothing to do with *insiders* and *outsiders*.

The priest and the Levite were the *insiders*, and they did *nothing*.

The Samaritan was the *outsider*, and he did *everything!*

Mr. Rogers’ theme song is certainly in tune with Jesus’ message:

It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood,

A beautiful day for a neighbor.

Would you be mine? Could you be mine?

Won’t you be my neighbor?

According to Jesus, a neighbor has nothing to do with proximity, and everything to do with need.

According to Jesus, if you pass by someone in need, you are passing your neighbor.

Whether that person is an *insider* or an *outsider*, a *newcomer* or an *old timer*, does not matter.

Good neighbors meet the needs of the people around them.

- They contribute to food pantries when people are starving,
- They donate to scholarships when students desperately need their support.
- They reach out to the stranger.
- They care about the refugee.
- They show mercy because they are people of compassion.

LUBBOCK HILL TO ELM RIDGE ROAD

Back in the nineteen forties the dead-end road across highway 12 from downtown Cuchara was called Lubbock Hill. At that time almost everyone on the hill was from Lubbock, Texas. Many of these families were friends in Texas and then became neighbors in Cuchara. There were no true outsiders. It was its own tight community.

But through the years this neighborhood, now called Elm Ridge Road, has changed hands so that now there are people from North Carolina, Texas, Oklahoma, and Colorado, all living in harmony on this beautiful hill. Not long ago we had two couples who bought a cabin together. They really stretched our hill’s demographics; they were from California. Of course they had already moved their main residences to Colorado, so I suppose they weren’t total outsiders.

This past year I received word that one of our medium-sized pine trees had fallen victim to the high winds and was lying flat across our property and that of our neighbor. But by the time I arrived in June, the tree had been cut into firewood and placed neatly on our woodpile, the branches disposed of, and the stump pulled completely out of the ground. And who would do such a neighborly gesture? The people from the “redwood forest.” That’s right! The ones some would assume were the true outsiders.

We on Elm Ridge Road don’t put any stock into insider and outsider talk. We just call ourselves neighbors—in the best sense of the word.

We help each other, share a meal from time to time, have deck parties—we even share the same garbage dumpster! You can't get much closer than that.

What unites us is not our backgrounds, our professions, our political views (We try not to talk about that!). What unites us is our love for this place and an acceptance of each other for that love we share. We have learned something here that our country has not yet mastered, the art of neighborliness.

So may I suggest today, on this Fourth of July, that if we want to be *good patriots* and *good citizens*, we begin by being *good neighbors*.

We must drop the labels of “outsider” and “insider” of “newcomer” and “old timer” of “them” and “us.”

We need a word to replace them all. That Word? “Neighbor.”

- Neighbor, the one we are supposed to love as much as ourselves.
- Neighbor, the one hurting, the one in need.

My friends, on this fourth of July, may I remind you?

It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood,
 A beautiful day for a neighbor...
 So let's make the most of this beautiful day.
 Since we're together we might as well say
 Would you be mine? Could you be mine?
Won't you be my neighbor?

CLOSING PRAYER

God of us all, forgive us when we divide ourselves one against another.

- Teach us to love all as your children.
- Save us from hardness of heart.
- Make us truly thankful for the blessings of this country.
- May your blessing extend to people everywhere.

Creator God, please continue to bless America and all the countries of your world.

SPECIAL MUSIC

God Bless America

BENEDICTION:

May God Bless America. May God Bless our World. May God help us be good neighbors to all. Amen.