

PENTECOST VII

‘Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?’ He said, The one who showed him mercy. Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’ Luke 10:36-7

“I can understand why they passed that illegal immigration law,” my friend said. “They have to do something.”

My friend, my very good, long-time friend, spends her winters in a retirement community in Arizona. She is, like me, a child of the sixties. She is, like me, a reflexive liberal-progressive politically. Socially she’s a bit more conservative – she hasn’t had the great privilege and joy of living in such a gay world as I’ve been blessed to be involved in these many years.

Still, our minds tend to meet on political questions, so this unsolicited remark took me aback.

Oh? I said. *You approve?*

“Well, they have to do something,” she said. “They’re everywhere. Illegals. You can see them everywhere.”

Gee, I said, so you can tell the legals from the illegals, just by looking at them? Huh!

She gave me a look. A look I interpreted as, *you don’t live there, so you don’t get to have an opinion.*

“I’m not unsympathetic,” she said.

Could have fooled me, I told her.

And we changed the subject.

My friend’s *cause célèbre* is clean elections. She’s devoted to this issue, as her older husband has been for many decades, and she works very hard with Common Cause and the League of Woman Voters, works to diminish the pay-to-play that’s endemic to our political system.

I respect her dedication, and I have an intellectual appreciation of the profoundly corrupting influence money has on our politicians and our policies. The shameful influence of money is, truly, the root of so much that’s wrong with our government today.

I just read an interview by a poet whose work and political commitments I greatly admire: C.K. Williams. He said that he thinks Obama has made a profound mistake in not putting the rooting out of corruption as the central concern of his administration. Williams loves Obama, but he's most disappointed in Obama's lack of commitment to what he promised in his campaign.

So, I *get* it. But I have to confess that I can't get excited about clean elections. Common Cause recently celebrated their 40th anniversary and gave lots of awards to people who have worked for clean elections- including an award to my friend. I was supposed to go, I bought a ticket, but I just couldn't drag myself there on a summer Saturday noon. My daughter said, "tell her you were stricken with narcolepsy."

My friend was disappointed that I didn't go. She said that many people had told her it was the best event they'd been to for years. So I dutifully asked what had made it so wonderful, and as she recited the list of speakers I almost did come down with sleeping sickness. I guess you had to be there. And, too, clean elections are just not my passion.

That's because, for me, the issue does not have a human face. It's a concept, a problem: a problem, I know, with many complicated dimensions and debased consequences. But still, for me, mostly abstract.

This is my failing; I confess it. But I remember Mary Glasspool, new suffragan bishop in L.A. , many years ago when I was in seminary, giving a talk about social justice work in one of my classes. She gave the illustration of chickens pecking away for food in a frantic and aimless, (stupid) way –I can't remember the details after almost 30 years– and said that we must resist the temptation to approach justice work in this way... taking a superficial stab at every issue. We will be effective only if we can focus, concentrate, and dedicate ourselves to something that arouses our passion.

I am not versed in the intricacies of immigration policy. I don't have an evolved position, by any means. The issue has not yet assumed a particular, personal, human face for me.

I remember hearing on a radio show a couple of years ago that immigration will be the next gay marriage. I wish I felt the time was right for any "next."

Gay marriage is up for grabs, nationally, , and depending on what happens in the Justice Department and perhaps the Supreme Court, the movement could be set back for years or decades. I pray not.

Marriage equality, and LGBT equality in general, of course have a very human face for me. The first face was that of my best friend from seminary. But now there are

hundreds of faces, perhaps thousands – folks I have worked with and for, folks I have ministered to and married, whose children I have baptized. And of course, my very own daughter.

As I say, I'm not there yet with immigration. But I do know this. Immigrants are our neighbors. They are our neighbors literally, figuratively, and theologically. Or at least, I hope they are theologically. I hope they are our neighbors, in faith.

How many of us have heard the parable of the Good Samaritan preached and taught and explicated over and over again? If people know anything about Scripture, anything about the New Testament, they usually know about the Good Samaritan. And, in my experience, they usually know about it wrong, because it has been wrongly taught, wrongly understood.

The “unpacking” of the Good Samaritan parable, as I was taught it, went like this: the poor guy who was mugged on the road and robbed and left half dead was a Jew. The Samaritan was a Gentile. These two religious groups shunned one another, generally. So the Samaritan transgresses a strong cultural taboo. And we were taught, thus, that our neighbor was not just the family across the back fence, not just our friends from school, but everyone! Everyone – kids we didn't like, foreigners, etc.

Sound familiar?

Well, what Jesus says is actually something quite different.

‘Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?’ He said, The one who showed him mercy. Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

The Samaritan is a neighbor not because he comes from a different tribe, and crosses cultural boundaries. He is a neighbor because he shows mercy – kindness, compassion– to the stricken victim. He is *good* because of his behavior, not because of his ‘strangeness.’

So, our neighbors, theologically speaking, are those for whom we act mercifully, those to whom we give kindness and compassion. In the case of the Good Samaritan, his actions are especially surprising, provocative, and perhaps challenging for him to carry out because of religious and ethnic norms. But Jesus doesn't say that. He says that the victim's neighbor was the one who showed him mercy.

Understanding the parable of the Good Samaritan does not give me a template for how to comprehend, or act on, immigration policy. But it does give me a theological foundation on which to start thinking and, perhaps, acting.

As I thought about this sermon I reflected on the immigrants I do know – the human faces in my life. The ones I know best are all here legally, and are here for the good reasons we all know about: they came to have better lives, they came to send money back home. And they do work that I don't want to do, or can't do, for myself.

Gloria cleans our house and often does our laundry. Noel, Adamis, and Lisa, the beauty experts at the notorious 'Xposure salon, take care of my hair and nails. And it occurred to me as I meditated that they know me, in some ways, very intimately. They are competent, and they are kind, and I have the utmost fondness for all of them. I trust them, as I must, having entrusted a good deal of my comfort and appearance in to their capable hands.

If any of them needed help, I would offer it without question. As I said, they are all here legally. Would it make any difference if they weren't? I seriously doubt it. Would I break laws on their behalf? I don't know... and I hope I won't be tested in that way. But I have a suspicion...

So, as I said, I don't have an evolved position on immigration policy. But making this sermon has moved me along somewhat in putting a human face to the question. Thinking about Jesus' teaching: what makes someone my neighbor? What makes me a neighbor? A good neighbor? What makes me a good neighbor is the kindness and compassion I show to anyone. What makes me a good neighbor is not *who someone else is*. It's *what I do*.

Alleluia! Amen