

Ironies of Life in a Christian America:

Who Is My Neighbor?

Rev. Dr. Roger D. Jones

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Hymns: #348, Guide My Feet; #134, Our World Is One World; #298, Wake Now My Senses

Chalice Lighting Words

One Voice:

On the first night of Hanukkah, Jewish families light the first of eight candles in their Menorah to celebrate the miracle of life and the blessing of survival. On the first Sunday of Advent, Christian churches light the first of four candles to invoke hope, love, joy, and peace. Every Sunday, we light the Flaming Chalice to affirm our Unitarian Universalist heritage and our connections to congregations around the world. Let us kindle its flame now and speak together the mission of our own congregation here at home.

All Voices:

We come together to deepen our lives
and to be a force for healing in the world.

Parable of the Good Samaritan

In the Gospel of Luke, chapter 10, Jesus is conducting an orientation and training session for 70 of his growing bunch of disciples. Out of the blue, a lawyer stands up to give Jesus a hard time. The text isn't clear if this guy's a new disciple or just a heckler. "Teacher," he says, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus asks, "Well, what's written in Jewish law? What do you read there?"

"Uh..., you mean: '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 love your neighbor as yourself?'"

"Right! That's it." Jesus replies. Do that, and you will live."

Prodding Jesus more, he says: "So who is my neighbor?"

Jesus replies with a parable: "A Jewish man from Jerusalem was going down the road to Jericho. He fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him, beat him up, and left him for dead in a

ditch. Now by chance a priest from a temple was going down that road. He caught sight of the man in the ditch; and then he crossed the road and passed by on the other side. A bit later a Levite came walking down the road; Levites were assistants in the temples. As the Levite approached where the man was lying in the ditch, he saw him and heard him groaning. Then he passed by on the other side.

Later on a Samaritan came down the road; he came near the man in the ditch and saw him. He was moved at the sight of him, and he didn't pass by. The Samaritan went to him, cleaned his wounds with oil and wine, and bandaged him up. Then he put him on his own animal to ride, took him to an inn, and took care of him overnight. The next day the Samaritan man had to go out, but he gave money to the innkeeper. He said: 'Take care of him. If you spend more than this for him, I will pay you when I come back.'

"So, what do you think?" Jesus asks his questioner, "Which of these three travelers was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

He replies, "The one who showed mercy to him."

Jesus nods and says, "Yes, now Go and do likewise."

Sermon

In this fall season at UUSS our Sunday service theme has been heritage and legacy. Though the UU movement and this congregation have become amazingly diverse in terms of religious and philosophical beliefs, our heritage has roots in Christianity. In the 1700s and 1800s in this country, both Universalism and Unitarianism were heretical movements in the Christian tradition. Using their God-given ability to reason and looking at their own experience and into their own hearts, our Universalist and Unitarian ancestors took the Holy Bible seriously, but not always literally.

They took seriously the stories, poetry and ethical challenges of the Jewish and Christian scriptures. They wrestled with the parables of Jesus and the stories about him in the Bible. I've been wrestling with a parable, but even more I've been wrestling with what it means to be a citizen of the

United States right now, and what it means that so many U.S. Americans identify as Christians.

Since the resurgence of the politically-engaged religious right in the past few decades, many evangelical politicians and political evangelicals have called the United States a “Christian country.” Indeed, for most of this country’s history that’s been a dominant label of U.S. American society, a “Christian nation.” This is ironic indeed. By irony, I mean: do those two words belong together? *Christian America?*

In spite of the religious diversity that has existed here since the beginning, in spite of the non-orthodox, non-Christian views of some of the American Founders, and in spite of the Constitutional separation of church and state, this been called a Christian country. In spite of the lack of agreement among denominations and religious sects about what counts as Christian, it’s been called a Christian country. When I think about the ministry of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel stories, I am struck by examples of the irony of the words, *Christian America*.

Here’s one irony. A primary theme of the ministry of Jesus was connection and belonging—an expanded sense of community. Yet recent surveys and studies have shown there is an epidemic of loneliness in the United States. It’s not an occasional problem, like feeling lonely now and then. It is a chronic source of pain for millions of people. It is an enduring identity—feeling isolated, unknown, unconnected. It’s too great a problem to be afflicting only those who aren’t Christians; it’s too widespread. Not having people whom you know and support and get support from—it’s an epidemic. Loneliness is an emotional experience and it’s a physical one. It’s bad for our health. Electronically, of course, we are more connected than people have ever been. Emotionally, however, studies indicate we feel as isolated as we have ever been. How ironic is this epidemic of loneliness in a Christian country!

The most familiar and frequent ritual of Christianity is Communion, the ceremony of sharing of bread and wine. Communion goes back to the earliest Christian communities, and Christians continue to link it to the Bible’s account of Jesus. At a meal with others, he blesses the bread and

breaks the bread and passes it around. He blesses the wine and shares the cup with others. Known by some as the Holy Eucharist and by others as the Lord’s Supper, Communion has a variety of symbolic and theological meanings among Christian communities.

The original context of this ritual, what lies behind the sacred ceremony, is the tradition of table fellowship. This is practice of community, centered around sharing a meal. Table fellowship means bringing people together; it means sharing space and time together. For Jesus and his disciples, it meant sharing food not only for sustenance and not only for companionship, but also to make a point about human dignity. It was a way to affirm the human equality of everyone around a table, and by extension to affirm the equality of everyone around the world.

One of the scandalous aspects of Jesus’s ministry had to do with whom he brought to the table, and the kind of people at whose table he was willing to sit. This included women to whom he was not related, even women without husbands or fathers to escort them and watch over them. This included people known to be sinners according to the religious and social codes of his day. This included men who worked for the oppressive Roman Empire, like its tax collectors, and even Roman soldiers. Jesus dined at the homes of rich people and shared meals out in the open with poor ones. He didn’t refuse the hospitality of those who got their wealth and power by filling a slot in the imperial bureaucracy. Of course, once he was in their lavish dining rooms, who knows what he said to make them squirm?

Food and the sharing of it come up so often in stories about Jesus. In the story of the Loaves and Fishes, Jesus ordered his disciples to take what little fish and bread they had among them and share it with thousands of people who came to see him and got hungry as the day wore on. The disciples at first hesitated, but then found out they had more abundance than they had thought.

In September my housemate moved away and I had an extra empty bedroom again. After I posted a listing, I got another housemate—well, three of them. One is a young man from the Peoples Republic of China, doing a postdoctoral

research position at the medical center within walking distance of my place; the other two are his wife and their two-month-old baby. When he contacted me, I expressed hesitation. I had my doubts about four of us sharing the same space. But I was willing to have them come over to meet, look at the place and talk about it. We discussed mutual expectations of sharing space and sharing chores. We discussed our living habits. We concluded that sharing the house could work out for the few months that remained for the family to be staying in the country.

I described my unusual work hours to them and explained that I was a minister at a congregation. “Okay,” the dad said.

I asked: “Are you secular?”

“What’s that?” he said.

“I mean, not religious of any kind.”

“Yes, that’s right,” he said. But he went on to say he was open. He’d lived with people of different faiths. “I’ve had Christian housemates,” he said. “I noticed that Christians like to have people over to eat.”

I smiled as I thought of this ancient practice of table fellowship. People taking time together not only to eat, but really to commune, to build community. Perhaps to build community beyond expectations and beyond familiar habits, perhaps even beyond their comfort zones. Extending the welcome, enlarging the circle, setting another place at the table. Noticing who doesn’t have a seat or perhaps who hasn’t been greeted. Perhaps finding someone you don’t know and sharing a conversation and a cup of coffee. Of course, you don’t have to be Christian to do this—indeed, that was the point Jesus was making!

The point of his ministry was to expand the definition of what it means to belong. One way to do that is to open the table, invite folks to it, then add a place at the table, and then add another place if needed. Then set up another table! You don’t have to be Christian to extend and expand the meaning of what it means to be worthy of human contact and human community.

Another irony for me about a Christian America is how much cruelty is going on here,

committed and allowed especially by people who identify as followers of Christ. Of course, many avowedly Christian leaders of countries and kingdoms over the centuries have perpetrated massive cruelty, even atrocities. What happened to the simple message of Jesus? What happened to his examples of compassion and healing? What happened to his challenge to reach out beyond our habitual assumptions and fears of other people? When asked how to gain God’s favor, Jesus emphasized the commandments from his Jewish heritage: “You must love God with all your heart, all your soul and all your strength, AND you must love your neighbor as yourself.” What happened to that?

What happened to Christianity, I think, was empire. A peasant movement which began in resistance to the oppression of the Roman Empire and in confrontation of the hypocrisy of religious authorities got taken over, co-opted, compromised...corrupted. Here’s how I think it happened. After the death of Jesus, his movement grew and expanded into new territories. Though people of all classes and conditions were drawn to the movement, it remained mostly a religion of people on the margins of society. Many of them suffered for their beliefs, but the simple faith of Jesus-followers kept growing.

After a few centuries of this growth, the anti-Christian emperor decided, “If you can’t suppress them any longer, join them.” In the fifth century, Emperor Constantine became Christian, and so did his empire. From that point forward, the faith became aligned with power structures and powerful people around the world. Most of the cruelty committed over the centuries in the name of Jesus Christ and the damage done in his name was perpetrated by people who lived in empires, including the U.S. American empire.

Empires and super powers and go for the gold. They see no value in humility, meekness or weakness. Jesus’ life was all about humility and weakness. Superpowers ask: who is my enemy? Jesus addressed the question: Who is my neighbor?

To be sure, all along there have been humble Christians, and poor ones, not wielding power other than the power of mercy and compassion. All along, there have been faithful people trying to

follow Jesus and his teachings. Faithful ordinary Christians remember the story of Jesus' humble origins.

In Latin America, especially in Catholicism, they have a Christmas tradition known as Las Posadas. In Mexico it goes back four centuries. It's a religious procession out of doors. The procession is a reenactment of the perilous days in the life of Joseph and Mary, before Mary gives birth to Jesus.

In Las Posadas, actors who portray this poor couple walk from house to house, knocking on doors, asking for mercy, looking for a bed where the pregnant mother can give birth in safety.

From door to door they knock and get the same answer: NO! Private homes and public inns show no mercy to this couple.

NO! --They are not from here.

NO! --They don't belong here.

NO! --We don't have any room anyway; we can't spare it.

Finally, Joseph and Mary end up in a stable out behind somebody's property, and the Baby Jesus is born in the midst of livestock animals. The ceremonial procession of Las Posadas ends in relief and rejoicing, followed of course by food. Later in December, this ritual will happen in Mexico and around Latin America and in cities in the U.S. with large Latin American communities.

Yet right now, we are facing a real-life story like this one, we are watching an ongoing story of poor people seeking safety and asking for mercy.

For the past several weeks thousands of refugees from Honduras and other countries in Central America have been walking north into Mexico and walking on toward Mexico's border with the United States. The idea behind this caravan, as it's called, is that it's safer to travel with others than on your own. When they travel alone or in groups of two or three, migrants are at risk of assault, extortion, and kidnapping. The risk is lowered if you are not alone, if you go with others.

They are wise to walk together, and they are desperate. What else would make you leave your home, send your kids away or take your kids to an unknown fate? What else would make you take the

risk of this journey but the fear of death if you stayed home?

About these asylum seekers and other migrants, President Trump has asserted *with no evidence* that most of them are criminals. With no evidence he even says terrorists from the Middle East are trying to sneak through at the U.S. Border with Mexico. He neglects the fact that the vetting process for asylum seekers is rigorous in the United States. At this congregation we know the vetting process is rigorous because our UUSS Refugee Support Team works with people who make it through the process and end up settled here in this area, here as our new neighbors.

Last week the U.S. government fired canisters of tear gas and rubber bullets at people waiting on the other side of the border, to disperse them. To discourage them by traumatizing them. On the news I saw barefoot people running from the tear gas—women and children in second-hand clothes, running away from the assault of armed agents of a government whose leaders claim to be Christian. This is what I mean by the irony of a Christian America—but maybe a better word than irony is *blasphemy*. Blasphemy against the dignity and the sacredness of the human being. Blasphemy against the one named Jesus, who said blessed are those who show mercy, blasphemy against the one who showed how blessed are those who know how to be true neighbors.

Donald Trump has defended the government's cruelty toward asylum seekers by saying that nobody can get into the United States unless they do it legally. Whether showing ignorance or willful dishonesty, this is wrong and it's cruel. The people are headed for official U.S. entry points with the aim of making legal applications for asylum.

Though some of the folks' applications are being received, the process is going slowly, and people keep arriving in great numbers. As they wait for a determination of their status, as they wait for mercy, many of them are sleeping on the streets of Mexican towns, grateful for food and medical attention provided by volunteers. Provided by people who ask: "Who is my neighbor?" and respond not with arguments but with action, with food and water, with money, with compassion.

Who is my neighbor?

This is the question in the parable of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke (Chapter 10). In common usage, the term Good Samaritan refers to a person who helps a stranger out, especially one in distress. Yet in the world of Jesus, people from Samaria—the Samaritans—were feared and loathed by the Jewish majority. Samaritans were seen as dangerous and seen as the Other. They were not anybody you'd expect to help *you* when you're lying in a ditch—and you probably wouldn't expect to help them, either. So, when Jesus told the story in the presence of 70 new disciples, you can be sure this blew their minds. In the parable, two religious leaders—one after the other—are passing by an injured man, and they walk to the other side of the road! Who finally does help out? A Samaritan, of all people! You can hear the murmuring in the crowd around Jesus: “Is that what he said? Is that his answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?”

Whether we identify as Christian or not, I hope we can appreciate that the ministry of Jesus was a ministry of inclusion. This meant breaking codes of silence and codes of separation among different people. Inclusion still means removing barriers, no matter who we think Jesus was. His ministry of inclusion meant inviting people to be part of his community, sharing meals and money as if they were family members.

Inclusion still means expanding the circle of who is family and what family means. His ministry drew people together of differing skills and backgrounds. For his ministry, he recruited workers with solid work histories and spotty ones, because everybody can play a part in making the world more kind and fair. Inclusion still means playing your part.

Jesus' ministry meant being present to others no matter how different they seemed from what was familiar, no matter how uncomfortable he felt around them. Inclusion still means expanding our comfort zones.

He created community not by segregation, but by inclusion. He expanded the sense of community by breaking ancient rules, ignoring boundaries, crossing borders, and raising the question: Is this any way to treat human beings?

Who is my neighbor? Whether Christian or not, it remains a good question to ask. When we don't know what to say to confront a relative's hostility and misinformation about immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers or anyone else—ask them: who is my neighbor?

But it's a question for each of us, too. When we feel discomfort about those who are different—ask, who is my neighbor? When we are feeling impatient with others: who is my neighbor? When angry with irrational people, selfish people, bad drivers: who is my neighbor?

This question works whether we are Christian or not. Whatever we think of his divine identity or the lack of it, Jesus is challenging all of us to question our thinking about people who are “not like us.” He is asking us to go the extra mile, to pursue understanding of others and to show respect for their basic humanity. We don't have to practice any particular kind of religion to try to stretch our hearts a bit more than we thought we could.

Showing compassion and mercy—it's not just for Christians. Reaching out to heal the epidemic of loneliness, speaking out against the empire of cruelty—not just for Christians. Stretching your comfort zones, showing some patience, and examining your attitudes—it's not just for Christians, and it's no easier for Christians than for anyone else.

That was the point Jesus was making! The point of his ministry was to expand the definition of what it means to belong, what it means to be part of the human family.

In our own lives, in the life of this congregation and our wider communities—in the life of this nation and all nations, may we strive to keep this question before us: Who is my neighbor? Let us keep our hearts open to the question and to the ever-emerging opportunities to answer it with our intentions, our words and our actions. Amen.