

Who Is My Neighbor: Stories from the Farm

Luke 10:25-37

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If there is one Biblical text that has been the subject of more sermons than any other text, it may well be the Parable of the Good Samaritan. There is just so much good material packed into the one story, so many points of departure. This famous parable, of course, is told by Jesus in response to the pressing question, “Who is my neighbor?” It’s no secret that Jesus would have his followers expand the common definition of ‘neighbor’ from the people who live near me and look and sound a lot like me and eat the foods I like and wear the clothes I wear and laugh at the jokes I laugh at...to a definition that transcends culture and language and religion and sexual orientation and pretty much blows the conventional definition of ‘neighbor’ out of the water. Jesus is concerned with the wholeness of each individual and he knows that our wholeness is directly related to the broadness of our definition of neighbor.

A week ago last Friday, forty-one of us middle school missionaries and advisors pulled out of the church parking lot headed for the Heifer Farm in Rutland, Massachusetts. We thought we knew what we were going to be doing: mucking stalls, feeding livestock, baling hay, weeding gardens, doing all the chores one might expect on a working farm. Though we did, indeed, do all of those chores, and more, we also found ourselves expanding our understanding of who our neighbors really are. By the time we loaded into the vans to come home five days later, we had rubbed shoulders with Peruvians and Guatemalans and Mexicans and Tibetans and Ghanans, eastern Europeans and Americans living in Appalachia.

We had grown down right neighborly with llamas and alpacas and with Aboo, the camel, and with a water buffalo or two, not to mention a lamb named Dexter who had been abandoned by her mother and therefore needed to be bottle-fed by our eager teenagers.

We found out that Tibetans don't have fast food restaurants or refrigeration or neatly packaged snack foods. When they get hungry, they gather wood, build a fire, boil water, cook ground-up barley, and call it zomba. And boy, is that tasty! I even licked the spoon we had used for stirring the pot to keep the barley from burning. Could Tibetans be our neighbors? As it turns out, we have several things in common: we hold our elders in the highest regard; we see the connection between stewardship of the land and our own survival; we get it that we are all sojourners, travelers on a spiritual journey, awed by the Creator. If the disciples in Jesus' day learned to accept the Samaritans as their neighbors, The Heifer Farm Forty-One learned that Tibetans are our neighbors, too.

So many things on the Heifer Farm were stunning to me. One day, I looked up and saw one of our boys holding, cuddling actually, a chicken! In the same way that a very young child won't let go of a doll or a security blanket, this kid had made a new friend and wasn't going to be separated from her! Pretty soon, others from our group were doing the same! No wonder they didn't want to eat the chicken tacos served for supper that night!

What I witnessed was our group of Middle School youth realizing a whole new sense of neighbor; that the four-legged and the feathered and the woolly ones and the one-humped one could all be our neighbors. We found we had plenty in common with these barnyard beasts. We all like to be respected. We all like to be known by our given names. We all like to know that our special gifts are honored and not ridiculed.

I wish you could have seen the girls grooming the dromedary and the boys milking the goats and the advisors counting sheep. At the Heifer Farm, no one is asking, 'Who is my neighbor?' It's just so obvious that this question is now obsolete.

Our students might not always have appreciated the salad greens served at supper or the hard cots for sleeping or the dehydrating heat of the day, but all of us came home with a new perspective on 'neighbor' and what it means for suburban Americans to be neighbors to Mexican itinerants or to Guatemalan villagers or to Tibetan nomads.

It's one thing to read and study the Scripture. It's another to go out into the world and to live the Biblical teaching, even for parts of five days. Some of our t-shirts have permanent stains and will never be the same again. Some of our trousers have lost that clean, soapy smell and will never be the same again. Some of our socks will cling tenaciously to the essence of goat milk and will never be the same again. But neither will we be going back to the old, narrow definition of 'neighbor.' Once you've been to the Heifer Farm, there's no turning back!

Reading back through the Parable of the Good Samaritan, I am certain that those who heard it for the first time were shocked to realize that the one who stepped up to save the day was none other than one of those mangy Samaritans, one of those Samaritans featured as the butt in all the jokes, one of those Samaritans relegated to the bottom rung of society's ladder. Jesus did have a way of upsetting the apple cart, of broadening our perspective. What I learned again last week is that Middle School youth can be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, the very ones Jesus has in mind to feed the hungry, to bring an end to poverty, and to care, finally, for the earth.

At the end of the Parable, Jesus cleverly brings the story full circle, brings the narrative back to the original question, asking; ‘which one of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ And the man answers, ‘The one who showed mercy.’ Then Jesus said, ‘Go and do likewise.’

When our youth return from their various mission trips, I always ask them what they learned. Immediately they declare that they learned how fortunate they are to enjoy the standard of living they do in Glastonbury. But I am never satisfied with that answer. I push them to look deeper. And when they do, they see clearly that they’ve gained a new definition of neighbor as anyone who anywhere, at any time, who shows mercy.

I am honored to be a pastor in a church that thinks the senior minister ought be going on the Middle High mission trip. Sign me up for next year! I’ll be the one wearing the t-shirt imprinted with the words, ‘Go and do likewise.’ In the greatest of hope, I say Amen!