

“AND WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?”

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St. Matthew's Pennington
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My heart was heavy as I tried to collect my thoughts for today.

I had just listened to the voice of a four-year old girl, who had witnessed the killing of her mom's boyfriend from the backseat of the car. A policeman had stopped the car for having a light out and shot the driver when he reached for the requested ID. The four-year old child tried to comfort her mom, as she was handcuffed, for no apparent reason, saying, "It's ok. I'm right here with you."

And then, as you all have heard, the news of the sniper attack and the intentional killing of five white police officers in what was described as "a vicious, calculated and despicable attack on law enforcement." And sadly, these types of headlines seem to be becoming commonplace.

What is going on? Who is my neighbor? Who can I trust? Who can the police trust? Who can black people, Muslims or GBLTQ people trust? How is it that a four-year old girl finds herself comforting her bereft mother? How is it that the color of our skin or our faith or our sexual orientation or our job determines the degree to which we are able to move around freely without fear in our communities?

In the face of such tragedies we often try to blame "the other" in order to find some kind of moral high ground in the face of what may feel like the earth crumbling beneath our feet. It is a natural reaction to jump to such conclusions instead of staying with the pain, the sadness and the suffering associated with the many stories of brokenness in the world today. But, in fact, this is nothing new. The words of the prophet Amos, written well over 2000 years ago, warned the people of Israel that because of social injustice and religious arrogance, they would be punished by a total military disaster. Amos reminded the people of Israel that they knew how God called them to treat one another.

So how does God want us to treat one another? How do we, to quote the prophet Micah, "do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God?"

In today's Gospel, a lawyer is told that to inherit eternal life, one must love one's neighbor as oneself. We are all very familiar with this commandment. That said, I have come to realize that few people understand what it means to have compassion and love for oneself in the way Jesus' describes. This became particularly apparent as a result of my work as a campus chaplain and director of the Center for Mindfulness and Compassion at the College of New Jersey.

Compassion is commonly defined as being fully present to someone's suffering and desiring to free the other from the causes and manifestations of suffering.

Self-compassion is therefore being present to one's own suffering with the same desire to free oneself from the causes and manifestations of suffering.

Our culture, the media, marketing and social norms are all about keeping up appearances. We all want to look like we have got it together and do our best to persuade ourselves that we do. We try to ignore, deny or reject the truth of the suffering that is part of human life. We all face loss, disappointment, rejection, confusion, doubt, insecurity, and uncertainty about the future. We all get sick and will ultimately die. That is the existential dilemma.

Of course no one likes pain and suffering, but by not acknowledging and accepting it, we often create more unnecessary suffering. The very effort to avoid pain can increase fear and anxiety, making it more difficult to see what is happening clearly and to make rational decisions.

To be compassionate we first need to accept our own humanity. At some time or other each of us has experienced the difficulty making it through the day – and some of us have experienced the difficulty making it through many days. All of us know what it is like to feel inadequate, insecure or unworthy. It is how we respond to these normal human feelings that determines their impact on our behavior. By responding to our vulnerabilities with compassion and kindness, we are able to connect with one another in a deeper, more meaningful way. It is through such awareness and self-acceptance that we are able to identify with one another in a way that changes us and has the capacity to change the world.

None of us asked to be born nor did we have any influence over our genetic make-up or the lives into which we were born. Some of us have been born into comfortable circumstances and others faced challenges from the moment of conception. But it is in recognizing both our shared vulnerability and the vastly different and inequitable hand of cards drawn by so many that we can begin to treat all our neighbors as ourselves.

In other words, it is through self-compassion that we are able to go beneath the surface and understand the feelings and fears that often motivate our behavior, for better and for worse. Through non-judgmental awareness of our own faults and limitations, we can better recognize and feel compassion for all others.

Being in touch with the complexity of our own humanity, we may be able to get a glimpse of what it might be like to be a black man facing systemic prejudice in an urban area as well as how it might feel like to be a police officer on the beat in the same volatile community. They are us and we are them. The most important job for each of us is to keep our hearts open, really open, to hear the suffering on all sides and then to work for real change, systemic change, the kind that Amos and Micah – and Jesus lived and died for.

In today's Gospel, the Good Samaritan "came near" to the beaten up man while the priest and the Levite "passed by on the other side." God calls us to come near to one another – to all our neighbors, here in Pennington, in all parts of the United States, in the entire world. The Gospel makes it clear that everyone is our neighbor. We are called to open our hearts, to see ourselves in the other, no matter who the other might be - no matter what the circumstances - to see the other with compassion.

At TCNJ last winter there was a peace and unity rally in response to the violence and killing of blacks by police officers and the terrorist attack in California. During the rally we gathered in a big circle. I was holding hands with a Muslim student wearing a Hajib. I mentioned to her that I was saddened and troubled by the extent to which all Muslims were being criticized for the actions of a few. In response, she calmly and compassionately responded, “they are afraid. It is just fear.”

It is just fear.

The poet Michael Leunig wrote:

There are only two feelings.

Love and fear.

There are only two activities.

Love and fear.

There are only two motives,

Two procedures, two frameworks,

Two results.

Love and fear.

Love and fear.

How do we respond to the violence in the world today? We acknowledge our fear, but choose love, we choose compassion. We choose to identify with everyone and leave no one out. We choose to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Prayers of the People insert:

We pray for our neighbors who were killed and injured this past unholy week in Baton Rouge, St. Paul and Dallas, for their families and loved ones who grieve. We pray for this nation, which is in desperate need of healing and of God’s love. We pray for those whose hearts may be inclined towards violence. We pray for justice and peace. We pray that we will do our part to help heal our wounds.

