

"Won't You Be My Neighbor?"

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What is the first thing that we do when we look into the mirror at ourselves... we see our reflection... we see a true representation of ourselves and let's be honest... to see ourselves clearly is pretty scary at times... we run from mirrors because we know that we are not perfect... it is not just the physical reflection or imperfections that we see... we see all of ourselves... we see parts of ourselves that we are not willing to let others see... we all hide something of ourselves in our own little closets... it is not just a gay thing, but a human nature thing...

We utilized mirrors in worship specifically this week because of the call to the necessity of looking at ourselves in the mirror... to face our own, inner, hidden parts that keep us from loving our neighbor as ourselves... the truth is that we are only capable of loving another to the extent of which we love our own self... if there are parts of our inner being that are hidden in our own closets then most likely we will find occasion to project this onto our neighbor...

Since the writing of the gospel and into our culture today, we continue to rewrite the definition of neighbor over and over again to include more and more individuals... was not the question originally whether or not the slave was our neighbor... then the question moved onto women as our neighbor... now we see the questioning of whether or not the GLBT community is included in the status of neighbor... if we do not stop the inevitable cycle of discrimination and bias who will... the answer is found in the central message of our gospel lesson for today... it is a message of affirmation... Mark's gospel is the only gospel that is not surrounded by parables such as the Good Samaritan which provide a clearer understanding of who the neighbor is... in this context, the neighbor is the one in need... that begs the reader to ask the question of the text found in Mark, why does Mark not offer us a clearer definition of neighbor... could it be the audience to which the writer is addressing?...after all, the audience is that of Cosmopolitan Rome according to our church tradition...Rome constituted urban centers of cultural exchange of individuals traveling in search of improved financial and social situations... these individuals left their native lands and family groups to encounter others who came for the same purpose but with a variety of background as well... Rome was a melting pot of ethnicities in which total strangers became their neighbors out of necessity... the definition of neighbor expanded beyond the traditional understanding of family kinship groups to strangers in their midst whom they may never have encountered before... we have a call as people of faith... and it does not matter where we land on the spectrum of service and ministry within the church... whether we are soon to be pastors or current pastors, lay leaders in the church... parishioners... in the midst of our deeply critical and analytical society in which we live... we need to get a little more out of our heads and a little more into our hearts... I believe God is calling us to stop asking the question from Mollenkott's book, "Is the Homosexual my Neighbor?" (marginalized, not marginalized... who is my neighbor) to a queer notion that is put into place throughout the world of asking not the question, are you my neighbor, but to take from the words of the children's program, Mr. Roger's neighborhood... "Won't you be my neighbor?" ... that is Imagining a Queer world in the midst of a culture which is afraid to engage in conversation with

one another... a society that does not take the time to even stop and ask, "How are you neighbor?" A society that walks on the other side of the street when we see a homeless person walking toward us... a society in which we do not know our neighbor's name and we have no clue that our neighbor in Mexico is working in *maquinas* experiencing human rights violations daily... .

And so we return to the text in Mark and find it is unique in a variety of ways ... though the text is the last of the three controversies Jesus encounters with Jerusalem leaders, our text is the only one of its kind in Mark in which a scribe is presented in a positive or affirmative way... (the first is the challenge to the authority of Jesus by the Pharisees... the next is the questioning of the meaning of resurrection, and finally) our text is looking to answer what the core of this newly founded community of believers might be... this community is in search of identity and they inquire because they want to know if they are the neighbor to which Jesus is speaking to... (answer that Jesus gives the scribe is the love of God and neighbor.)

Our gospel version differs from the other gospels in that the scribe in Mark is not a hostile questioner... nor does the scribe appear to be testing Jesus as in Matthew and Luke with the Pharisees and the lawyer... other engagements in Mark's text previous to this are more controversial in nature, but what is evident in our text is the mutual affirmation in the exchange between Jesus and the scribe... their engagement in conversation exemplifies, "Won't you be my neighbor"... as we will see in this text mutual affirmation brings about solidarity... each side holds onto what is important to them and moves forward for the greater good of society...

Isn't Jesus modeling our theme for this week, "Imagining a Queer World"... a world in which there is inclusion of all people... where everyone is acknowledged as your neighbor... gay or straight, black or white, female or male or a combination there of, the transgender individual, the addict, the sexual perpetrator... which begs me to ask you a question to think about for a moment, who is it that you have difficulty loving as your neighbor... as yourself... because of my line of work, sexual predators comes to mind for me... I work at SummitQuest Academy and prior to my working at this residential treatment facility, I was naïve to the existence of pre-adolescent and adolescent sexual perpetrators... I was well aware of adult sexual offenders and thought of ways to ensure that my son would not have to be a victim of sexual abuse... I learn to live out love of neighbor each and every day I go to work... it is difficult to go in there daily and to maintain a mindset that each of these boys is my neighbor and that God calls me to love them as myself... with the onset of the publicity in our television shows and news coverage such as Dateline of sexual predators on the internet, I am also challenged to think of a pedophile moving into my neighborhood and how I might react and interact with the individual... will I treat the individual differently knowing what that person has done and knowing the potential threat to my son... how do I affirm my neighbor even when he/she is a pedophile... for some of us... it is affirming a female pastor... a Muslim brother... a transgender individual... a father who physically abused... a lesbian or gay person with children desiring rights to marriage... I believe the answer is found in our narrative today in guiding us to live out our faith lives...

From the very beginning of our pericope, we notice the affirmation which begins the setting of the

conversation between the scribe and Jesus... the scribe has just observed Jesus engaging in a dispute with others and the scribe affirms Jesus' teachings by claiming that "he had answered them well". The question asked by the scribe, "Which commandment is the first of all?" is not a testing of Jesus' ability to answer the question correctly but a genuine dialogue in which the scribe is attempting to codify the law and summarize its fundamental principles based on what principles Jesus will choose.

Jesus' authoritative answer, labeled as the Great Commandment is foundational for the life of the Christian community... Jesus' answer to the scribe's question combines Deuteronomy 6: 4-5 and Leviticus 19:18... not only does Jesus affirm the scribe's tradition by using the Pentateuch, but retains the significance of his own Jewish heritage – Jesus finds the common ground... Jesus finds the common ground in our story by utilizing the opening words of the *Shema* found in Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one."

Not only does Jesus affirm his common Jewish heritage with the scribe, but Jesus also establishes love as the ground of Christian faith and life... Jesus affirms the God of Israel as the one and only God...

The first part of the commandment is love of God... Mark presents four qualifiers for how we are to love God which are "with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength" ... the gospel of Mark and Luke are the only gospels which contain all four... Matthew is missing strength... the point in this is that... it does not matter whether there are three or four qualifiers... it is a prescriptive of how we should love God that is important... what is at stake is the total love of God based on the sovereignty of God in our lives... and over our entire lives... the addition of mind in the New Testament texts from that which is found in Deuteronomy 6:5 should not be construed as Jesus' trumping his teaching over that of the Old Testament, but is a reflection of Hellenistic times in which there was a greater concern for things of the mind...

I believe for the GLBT community or anyone marginalized or not... this is where the text becomes difficult... In the NIB the qualifiers are highlighted and broadened into a modern context as to what happens when our inner most being (our heart)... our lives – that which gives us our individual identity (our soul)... our energy, strength, resolve, and resources (our might); and/or our understanding and intellectual capacities (our mind) have been submitted to prejudice and bias in the world... the core of our being is affected... that is when we look in the mirror and we do not see our reflection, but the reflection of how the world sees us... when someone tells you that you are not their neighbor by their actions and words instead of asking you to be their neighbor... the soul is broken – that which gives us our individual identity... for a transgender person that means that the gender to which they were born into is not their identity so they worship God with only part of themselves... what they need is what Jesus did for the scribe... a transgender person need to be affirmed in the gender to which they align... to their true heritage... a gay, lesbian, bi-sexual person needs to be affirmed for the person they either choose to love or who they were born to love... GLBT individuals are not the only ones who find themselves withholding or giving up their own individual identity... each of us gives up parts of our individual identity at times in our lives... those parts which are hidden in the closets of our lives which keep us in bondage with shame and guilt... by asking someone to be your neighbor... you affirm their

entirety... you take them from shame to *Shema* in which we are open to hearing... in which we are open to seeing... in which we are open to feeling... no longer then do we hide the images in the mirror, but we proclaim the reflection as the reflection of Jesus and we discover that Jesus assures us in our brokenness...

The second part of the commandment is to "love your neighbor as yourself". Jesus is our example of loving God and neighbor in which we are called to action... to

participate in neighborly love as the Good Samaritan in the parable in Luke... but more importantly tied to love of neighbor is the ability to love yourself... traditional gay theology claims that in order to love others, one must love themselves... no matter who we are as we sit together there are areas in our lives in which we need to love ourselves a little better... this is our common ground...

Now, our text shifts to the scribe again affirming the teachings of Jesus in which the scribe states, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there are no other' and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,'... the key in this passage though is found when the scribe approves of what Jesus says and adds the caveat that these are more important than "all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." One must be clear that the scribe is not dismissing the ritual practices of burnt offerings and sacrifices, but affirming the secondary role of offerings and sacrifices with regard to the primary role of love... the scribe is able to hold onto his Jewish heritage acknowledging the significance of their differences, but affirming one another into solidarity...

Jesus follows by affirming the scribe in which he claims that he has answered wisely...

To Imagine a Queer World... to permit our imaginations and creativity to hope for a world that is different... a world where all people are affirmed, discrimination fades to solidarity found in our differences which are lifted up and celebrated... the problem is that we are human and humans burn out... we lose our passion and zeal to envision a world different than the present... when we lose our passion, we lose our sense of hope... there is a diminishment of a greater perfection to be achieved... how then as a leader, pastor, person of faith do we maintain a sense of hope in the midst of hopeless times... we hold onto our faith... and when our faith begins to diminish... we hold onto what is true in our passages today... we love God with our entire beings... there are days at SummitQuest that I struggle more than others... just the other day, I was assigned to work with a boy who is pretty close to being FTA'd (failure to adjust) which means that he is not able to acclimate to our program and is showing no signs of progress... every day that the counselors have to deal with him... it is a guarantee that he will attempt to run away from the facility, not follow staff directions, provoke a peer, push into staff... I found myself on Sunday when I was assigned to monitor him thinking, how on earth am I going to get through this evening?... I simply did not want to deal with him... recalling the writing of my sermon in that I am called to love my neighbor as myself... I found myself trapped in my inability to live out the commandments of my faith... he makes it difficult to continue to love him as your neighbor... none-the-less, he is still my neighbor and I needed to ask the question, won't you be my neighbor... so I

found myself doing two things in the midst of my struggle... I surrendered myself to God in that moment through prayer and then I elicited help from my fellow co-workers when I did not have the strength to deal with the resident... there are times that we will need to call on someone else to help us love our neighbor as ourselves... Imagine a Queer World in which we spent more time affirming our likeness and less time on discovering our differences, but celebrating our differences... Rudolph Bultmann, a New Testament scholar of the 20th century taught that, "moment by moment, we are called to take responsibility for our lives with a decision that expresses love rather than to allow ourselves simply to reflect the culture of our time... "

Can I be bold with you today... will you permit me to step on some toes in love... I want to be honest with you today... please do not give me some charity support group in your churches... don't offer me your welcoming programs in your churches... I ask you to affirm me in my entirety... stand with me... stand beside me and help me Imagine a Queer World... help me create a Queer World where sexuality does not matter... where racism does not exist... where gender is no longer stereotypical... where globalization is diminished and cultural differences are affirmed... if we want to live in a world contrary to cultural and society standards then we have to first be able to imagine a Queer world before we can implement a queer world... at the end of our passage because the scribe and Jesus found their common devotion to God, they were able to walk away from a mind-set of "us" vs. "them" to a mindset of "we"... We do walk this journey together and everyone is invited on this journey, but it is up to each one of us to ask "Won't you be my neighbor?" ...