

Sermon for Sunday, July 14, 2013 Luke 10:25-37 "Who is My Neighbor?"

I had no idea where I was. I was driving to a meeting as part of my work in an internship in an Anglican church in the Middle East – in Qatar, to be exact. When I left the house, I had a rough idea of where I was going. I had a street address, which was useless, because there were no street signs. Eventually, I realized I was utterly lost and had no idea how to get anywhere – my supervising priest's house, my in-laws' house, the people I was visiting. I parked the car and just sat there, fuming at my own incompetence. Someone spotted me sitting there. A Qatari, given his sparkling white thobe and dashing headscarf. He said, in Oxonian English, "you look lost."

I had heard a few stories about non-Qatari women being harassed, so I was on my guard. "I've gotten turned around somewhere. I'm trying to get to XYZ Street [*I'll use that because the real street name is too hard to remember even now*] and I must have missed a turn. Do you know which way I should go?"

I hoped he would be kind and give me some directions. The usual Qatari directions are something like this – *you go to the Pearl roundabout and get off where the turnoff to Al Jazeera is, then you go for another couple minutes and you'll see the white house on the right. Turn there.*

This presumes you know where you are in relation to the traffic circle that has a statue of a gigantic pearl in the middle, that you know which turnoff leads to Al Jazeera, and that you know which of the three hundred white houses is the correct one. Directions are not a strong suit.

Instead, he said "It's too difficult to explain. Follow me."

And he hopped into his Mercedes – all autos in Qatar are Mercedes or BMWs or Ferraris, it seems – and he revved it up.

I was more than a little nervous. Should I follow him? Would he lead me to someplace where he would sell me to the highest bidder? Would he hold me for ransom (a foolish guess, since he was probably richer than all my extended family combined)? I decided to take the risk and follow him. That worked pretty well for a while. I started to recognize a few landmarks, which helped my anxiety. Then we got separated at one of the infernal roundabouts, and I lost him. I pulled over, trying to guess which direction I should go next. In a minute, he once again pulled up next to me and rolled down his window. "Damned Pakistani traffic police at the roundabout! Sorry I lost you. Not to worry – we are almost there."

And two minutes later, he had led me to the address I was searching for. I leaned out of the car window into the desert heat. "Thank you so much! You were so very kind!"

He said, "When I first went to university in Oxford I was always getting lost, and I hated the feeling. I don't want you to feel that way about Qatar."

And off he drove.

It's a funny thing about being a stranger in a strange land. You feel like a creature from another universe, and it's rare that someone treats you like another human being. But this Qatari, who

probably had other things to do, took the time to shepherd me to my destination, all because he didn't want me to feel like a creature from another universe in his country.

It was for me the lived experience of what Jesus was talking about when he answered the lawyer's question "who is my neighbor?"

The Qatari gentleman decided I was his neighbor, despite the fact that I was a woman, despite the fact that I was not Qatari, despite the fact that I wore no headscarf and thus was not Muslim. Because he thought I was his neighbor, he helped me.

He thought I was his neighbor, and neighbors do things for each other. My neighbor Roland, who comes from Australia, regularly shows up at our door with food from his garden, or to help Doug with some project or another. Our other neighbor, Ed, is a part of what might be called the Tree Circus of Hawthorne Avenue. Roland, Doug and Ed regularly do tree pruning at our houses and at other neighbors' houses. They do it because neighbors help each other out.

Neighborly help is rarely as dramatic as the story of the Good Samaritan in today's Gospel. It's usually more like Roland and Doug and Ed, helping each other and other neighbors when a need arises.

But occasionally there is a story of neighborliness that breaks all our conventions of "who is my neighbor?"

A few months ago, there was a horrific event. Bombs were detonated in Boston, near the finish line of the Boston Marathon. Some people died, many people were cruelly maimed. The alleged perpetrators of the attack were two young men who had become swayed by radical religious teaching and believed they should wreak vengeance on Americans. One of the alleged perpetrators died in a shootout with police during the manhunt.

His body was autopsied and it was sent to a funeral home. The director of the funeral home tried to find a place to bury the body of this man, and could not. Every cemetery in New England and the Tri-State area refused him.

Enter Martha Mullen, a middle aged Methodist woman who lives in Doswell, just up the road from us. She heard about the fact that a burial place could not be found, and she thought that wasn't right. Even people who did evil things deserved to be treated with some modicum of dignity.

"My first thought was Jesus said love your enemies," she said.

Then she had an epiphany. "I thought someone ought to do something about this - and I am someone," Mullen said.

So Mullen sent emails to various faith organizations to see what could be done. She heard back from Islamic Funeral Services of Virginia, which arranged for a funeral plot at the Al-Barzakh cemetery in Caroline County. "It was an interfaith effort," she said.

She went on to say "Nobody is without sin. Certainly this was a horrific act, but he's dead and what happened is between him and God. We just need to bury his body and move forward. People were making an issue and detracting from the healing that needed to take place."

When Martha Mullen thought of Tamerlan Tsarnaev, she didn't think of him as a good man. She didn't think of him as someone she would sit and have a cup of coffee with. She thought of him as enemy. And yet she also thought of him as neighbor.

And that's the point that Jesus was making when the lawyer posed the question "who is my neighbor?"

The parable of the Good Samaritan is not a warm and fuzzy story. Samaritans and Israelites were sworn enemies. Each thought the other was religiously heretical. The idea of a good person from Samaria helping a wounded Jew was just as outlandish as a good Methodist helping a murderous radicalized Chechen Muslim.

It would have been the sort of thing that would get the radio talk show hosts in Samaria going wild, saying that this was a betrayal of all that was good and true, caring for this evil Jew, just as in our time Martha Mullen was reviled for her actions.

Who is your neighbor?

Yes, your neighbor is the great friend down the street who brings you Swiss chard from his garden and eggs from his hens and helps you cut down a tree limb. But your neighbor is also the odd man who mutters to himself as he puts up signs on his lawn saying "if your dog fouls my lawn it will be shot," or the woman with the headscarf who doesn't talk to you when you say hello. Your neighbor is the black teen who wanders through your neighborhood at night with a bag of Skittles and a bottle of Gatorade in hand. Your neighbor is the neighborhood watch chief, who seems a little overzealous to you. Your neighbor is the loud and bossy lady who complains about your lawn not being mowed enough, and the guy on the street corner who holds up a sign saying "Lost everything but life. Please give."

Your neighbor is not just the person you find easy to like, it is the person you find hard to like. Like a religious radical who is your sworn enemy. Like a Jew. Like a Samaritan. Like a Muslim. Like a stranger. Like an alien...

Jesus gives us an uncomfortable definition of who your neighbor is. You can choose to stick with the easy definition – someone who is just like me – or you can take the harder road – someone who doesn't seem to be like me. You just might discover that you have more in common with that uncomfortable stranger than you realize...more in common than you care to admit.

Because at one point or another, we are all strangers in a strange place, whether it's Qatar or Samaria or Jackson Ward. Wouldn't you prefer that those who live there consider you a neighbor rather than the enemy? Might you not change the world just a little, if you yourself look at the strangers where you live as your neighbors?

Amen.