

As I was listening to the news on Wednesday regarding the Coast Guard helicopter crash off the Washington coast my ears perked up when I heard the response of one of the men who took his fishing boat out to help with the rescue, "It was the right thing to do."

A recent television ad by an insurance company assures us that they, "do the right thing." Of course, this implies that other insurance companies may not do the right thing. They would have us believe that doing the right the thing is the exception and not the norm in our day.

The Psalmist in the 25th Psalm prays, "*Make me know your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths.*" Or, "Help me do what is right." The Psalmist and the lawyer in Luke's Gospel both desire to know the right path.

In Luke's Gospel we have a question asked and a story told. The lawyer wants to know what he must do to inherit eternal life. He is reflecting a popular theology of his day: salvation is something that is earned. "How can I earn eternal life?" Jesus does not respond to his question with an answer but asks him, "*What does the Law say?*" He simply asks the lawyer how he interprets the Law. "You are a lawyer, you tell me." The lawyer is looking to keep the letter of the law. He wants to do only what the law requires. So, what does the law require?

His response is from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. He adequately sums up the crux of the Law. But he needs more. If he is to love his neighbor as himself, who is his neighbor? Luke tells us that he asks Jesus this question because, "*he wanted to justify himself*" (10:29b NIV). How can you love your neighbor if you do not know who your neighbor is? Rather than answer Jesus tells a story.

A man is traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho and is robbed, beaten and left for dead. A priest comes along and passes by. A Levite comes along and passes by. Both leave the man for dead. These two probably both thought they were doing the right thing. They may have had valid excuses for their actions. What if it is a trap? Maybe they have heard reports of people being robbed by those staging injuries. When people stop to help they are robbed and beaten by the decoy's associates. What if he is not a Jew? The identity of the man would make a difference in their minds. If he was a stranger than he would not be a neighbor. And, if he is dead, what could they do to help anyway?

Now comes a Samaritan. Everyone listening would expect the Samaritan to pass by. He is the one least expected to give any help. He is not the one who "would do the right thing." Look at the dangers he faces. What if others come by and see him bending over this man. What would their first thoughts be? Has he just beaten the man and is now robbing him? I mean, a hated Samaritan bending over a man who has been beaten... Who would stop to ask what he was doing? Assumptions would have already been made just by what they saw. They would jump to an immediate conclusion without asking.

The Samaritan however does not consider the risks involved. Here is a man in need. He stops, tends to his wounds and takes the man to the nearest place of safety, puts him up for the night and makes arrangements to pay for the man's needs beyond what he has already done. He "does the right thing." Now for the question, "Which one was a neighbor?" and then the challenge, "*Go and do likewise.*"

Several things come to mind as I read this story. The first is that this was a chance encounter. Those in the story were not out looking for a neighbor in need or for a chance encounter to help someone. The need arose and the question was whether or not they would meet the need. I remember Boy Scout days when one of our tasks was to do a good deed every day. I mean, how many old ladies really need help in crossing the street? We tried to find a good deed to do every day and maybe not all the good deeds we did were really deeds that needed to be accomplished. We just thought they were. This is the story of a chance encounter and the one who met the need presented to him. The situation presented itself and they had to make the decision of how they would respond. Two pass by, the ones who should have stopped and helped. The one who stopped is not the one the crowd would have expected to stop.

We often think we know how we will react in certain situations, but until we are actually confronted we never really know.

The other thing I see in the story is: sometimes doing the right thing looks like we are doing the wrong thing. Two examples come to mind. One was a story in the news just a few weeks ago where a young couple does the wrong thing thinking it was the right thing. The couple found a baby seal on the beach. There were no other seals around and they believed that this baby had been abandoned. They took the seal back to their motel room, kept it there for the night (wonder if they got any sleep that night) and then took it to the authorities in the morning. Now as this story was in the paper we had just returned from Ocean Shores and had listened to a lecture about leaving baby seals alone, even if they seem abandoned. Seal moms often leave their babies on the beach while they go in search of food. In almost all cases they will be back. Doing the right thing involves leaving the baby seal and walking away. It may not seem like the right thing to do but it is.

The rescue call came in as a bicycle versus car accident. The bicycle rider was a young girl and the accident had tossed her into a very big puddle of water (cold water, it was late October, early November). Several of those who saw the accident wanted to get this young girl out of the cold water as quickly as possible. Fortunately the rescue team arrived rather quickly and kept them from doing that. Before she could be moved she had to have her neck and spine stabilized to prevent any further injuries. The right thing was being done even though to many of those around it was the wrong thing.

Going back to Jesus' story, as we said earlier, in doing the right thing the Samaritan takes the risk that someone passing by thinking that he is the robber. In doing the right thing he may be thought of as doing the wrong thing. What is he doing? Why is this man putting this man on his donkey? What does he hope to gain from this?

Doing the right thing often leads to misunderstandings. Perhaps this is why the Priest and the Levite pass by. It is better to pass by than to stop and get involved. Who knows what others might think.

Jesus pushes the lawyer and us beyond the Law. The Priest and the Levite may have acted within the scope of the Law. They may have had legal justification for their passing by. Justification for their actions. But there are those times when being a neighbor pushes beyond what is just required by the Law.

These are tough days to be a Good Samaritan. Thought of a town that not too long ago that passed an ordinance forbidding the feeding of homeless people in a town park. This came about because one woman became concerned about the homeless and started feeding people on a weekly/daily basis (can't remember which). Some in the town became concerned, afraid this would attract other homeless people. Thus the ordinance was passed making it illegal to feed the homeless on town owned land. Wondered about this in a day when so many of the homeless are families with children – homeless because of circumstances over which they have no control. Food for the Children is providing meals in some of the southern states affected by the Gulf oil spill – people who are on the edge of homelessness because of something over which they had no control. What if Food for Children was asked to stop feeding these people?

Who is our neighbor? How do we meet their needs? What is the Law?

“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.” (10:27 NIV)

Who is our neighbor? Who stands in need in our world today?

NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985
NRSV, Division of Christian Education, NCC, 1989