

The Surprising Neighbor

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Greeting: President Jennings, Vice President Kupisch, Grand Marshall Becker, Rev. Dr. Gieselman, Members of the Faculty, Distinguished Alumni/ae and Friends,

It is my honor and joy to be with you today for many reasons. One is that I consider Evansville to be one of my hometowns. It is always good to return to a place where a *prophet-is-without-honor*. In such a circumstance each of us is kept appropriately humble and grounded. Elaine and I hold many fond memories of Evansville. We are blessed with an abundance of friends--friendships continue that were first forged in the ebb and flow of relationship in this community.

I am also particularly honored to give the Edgar M. McKown lecture, as I have known the McKown family for many years. As a Methodist preacher's kid in Southern Indiana, I knew him by reputation and have a few memories of Dean McKown from my youth. I knew of his commitment to teaching the scriptures in new ways to new generations. Leslie and Martha have been friends of ours for many years, and I hold them in great esteem.

Thirty years ago, Evansville was my post-graduate-school-and-laboratory. It was here I was mentored and loved, challenged and critiqued and formed into my maturity as a pastor, teacher, researcher and administrator. So, I ask you to bear with me for just a few moments while I reminisce. I promise, this will have some relevance to what I have come to say today.

Here, along the banks of the Ohio River, I was privileged to know priests, rabbis and pastors from a wide range of theological perspectives. We built a wide ecumenical and interfaith network. It was here I was privileged to know, and work with, mayors and civic leaders like Russ Lloyd, Mike Vandever, Sol and Alberta Stephenson, Sara Davies, Jim Landers and Randy Sheppard. Perhaps I am overly nostalgic, but as I witness the shenanigans in our nation today, my memory of 1970s and 1980s Evansville is that while we had our battles as Democrat and Republican, there was a deeper bond, a commitment to community and nation that transcended the skirmishes of party and ideology.

It was here I witnessed the strength and resources of an African American community still struggling with the realities of segregation and discrimination. It was here I learned from friends at the Labor Temple and the Petroleum Club. Here

there were friends in the courtroom and the jailhouse. It was here I saw good people (and some not-so-noble-rascals) struggle to find appropriate solutions to vexing problems. Here I saw strikes that lasted too long, industrial plants as they closed, neighborhoods divested of resources, new suburbs as they mushroomed and, often, there were city council and school board meetings that would stretch on into the middle of the night. It was only later, when I was a pastor in Bloomington, that I had language to speak of such marathon meetings. In the middle of a long-winded church meeting in Bloomington, I watched Indiana University's beloved chancellor Herman Wells, then 92 years old, open his eyes, lean forward in his wheelchair and ask, "Is this much democracy really necessary?" In that moment, I thought of Evansville... and especially of Elaine, my spouse, who served eight years on the EVSC school board. I remembered how she would come home early in the morning exhausted and sorely tested by the dilemmas of too few resources and too many public demands.

And it was here that I learned, as James Alexander Thom puts it, that in Indiana we divide the world into two categories: basketball and everything else. So, I remember well those Purple Aces playing in Roberts Stadium and that awful December night in 1977 when the plane went down carrying those young men and coaches from this university and so many of our hopes and dreams were shattered. I remember 1982 when Gary Roosevelt beat Bosse in the semifinal state championship game in double overtime. My eleven-year-old daughter, Lydia, fell into my arms, broken-hearted, sobbing as if the world had collapsed because her beloved Bulldogs had lost.

I remember so much more -- news anchor David James announcing the election of Bob Orr as governor in the 1980s, followed by weather woman Marsha Yockey in the fullness of all her idiosyncratic silliness.

If we had a couple of days, I could tell you of friends on the faculty and administrators at this university--friends who helped me think about politics, faith, community, science and ethics. I could tell of neighborhood folks, poor in material things but rich in soul. I could tell of long lunches with my rabbi friend, or those Presbyterian, Baptist, Roman Catholic and UCC clergy colleagues. Of course, I was especially fortunate to call one Lutheran pastor of a core city congregation my dear friend. His tiny brick church was just down the street from where we lived. I would meet with Walt (who taught at this university for several years) on most Thursday afternoons in his small study. Together we would pray and plot, make confession and offer reconciliation, laugh and cry -- pretty good stuff for a Lutheran and Methodist in the 1970s and '80s. I remember my utter astonishment, listening as he would pace back and forth in that tiny office -- four steps in one direction and then back four steps. He would quote from memory long cantos of classical poetry or passages of a novel he was in the process of writing.

Some of you will remember Evansville's motto in the mid-twentieth century about this being a city where South and North meet. I can now publicly confess that in those years of the 1970s and 1980s, a few of us would laugh as we altered the motto to say that Evansville was "where the hospitality of the North meets the industry of the South." [Think about it.] Today we have in fact made hospitality into an industry. And that is what I want to spend the time remaining speaking with you about.

Prayer: *Quiet our minds. Bid our anxious fears subside, O God. Help us to seek your heart. And, in the process, turn our lives into active prayers. Turn our thoughts from self-preoccupation into a hunger for your kin-dom on earth. Amen.*

I hold that this Gospel Parable you heard read, often called the Good Samaritan story or the Parable of the Unexpected Neighbor, is central to understanding the work of the biblical patriarchs and matriarchs, the prophets and the message of Jesus. It is therefore a guide for healthy human behavior. It is also a story that has been domesticated, romanticized and distorted in meaning. Yes, it is an ancient story and, yes, we live in more complex and globally interrelated times; still, I hold that in one form or another, this is a template narrative, suggesting that compassion for the stranger, openness to the foreigner, and a welcoming of the alien gives us purpose and hope. This parable should be considered a genetic marker in our spiritual DNA toward a robust and constructive humanity.

To be certain, there are other narratives, other themes, but I would suggest this essential storyline is sorely needed today, when we are bombarded with messages that are encumbered with fear and where practices for a common good (education, healthcare, innovation and entrepreneurship) are lost to a never-ending and impossible race in the search for security systems. The theme of **care for the neighbor** challenges our propensity to selfishness, bigotry and violence and offers a more promising framework for a productive future.

Imagine the scene reported in Luke's Gospel. The crowd is clustered around. The lawyer stands, addresses Jesus as "teacher." Yet there is a mixed message. Luke says the lawyer *stands to TEST Jesus*. Everyone leans in, the better to hear. Word was out that Jesus was some kind of spiritual renegade. The lawyer was testing the character and authenticity of this traveling rabbi. Was this Galilean up to the bar exam he was facing? Did he really have something both ancient and new to proclaim?

At first, the dialogue is predictable. The attorney knew his craft. He didn't ask a question for which he didn't already know an answer. He may have been there on

a surprise inspection from the GGTSAA, you know, Greater Galilee Theological School Accrediting Association. And so the drama unfolds. "What is necessary for eternal life?" the attorney asks. Jesus responds with a question, "What do you think? What does the law suggest?" It's a verbal ping-pong match.

Who could have guessed they were so near an unimaginable surprise? The lawyer cites Deuteronomy 6:5 from the great central prayer of Judaism, the *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel! You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, mind, soul and strength." He goes on, this time from Leviticus 19: "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Some think the contest is over as Jesus says, "You have answered well. **Do this and live.**"

Not much new here, the listeners think, and just as those in the back are turning to leave, the lawyer probes, "And, just who is my neighbor?" A story like none other is ready to be told - the stage has been set. It begins predictably. There was a man journeying down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. He is attacked, beaten, robbed and left for dead.

The listeners know this road. In fact they think they have heard the story before. It is a familiar framing of everyday experience, concerns for safety and the selfishness of the elites (priests, Levites, scribes, lawyers). Many in the crowd have heard and probably told some version of the story. They know how it will turn out. The priest and Levite pass by and then a good Jewish layperson will come at some risk and, unlike the elites, will care for the beaten Jewish brother.

Many of the listeners have actually traveled the twisting road. The way between Jericho and Jerusalem is steep. Every 100 steps along the seventeen-mile journey the traveler descends on average another four feet in altitude. Down it drops, winding unpredictably. Rounding a switchback, one can see those traveling ahead. As you meet those traveling up the road, you ask who is ahead and if there might be water or provisions ahead... and always the question, "Is there danger ahead?" All in all, it is a sensational setting for a sensational surprise.

My daughter, Lydia (yes, the very same one who fell into my arms sobbing at the loss of her basketball team in 1982), recently told me of a memorable experience. It involves our year-and-a-half-old grandson, Zack. [Can you believe I waited this long to tell you about my grandchildren?] At any rate, in visiting with a neighbor, Lydia discovered a new modestly priced video monitor. She had used an audio monitor, but now she could visually focus on the little one sleeping upstairs while she is downstairs working in the kitchen or at her desk. She purchased one, just like the one next door. One afternoon she set up the camera, went downstairs and looked to see Zack in his crib. To her horror, there was no child there! She rushed

upstairs into his room only to find him sleeping soundly. Back down she went and--you guessed it--no child was in the crib. Confused, she went up the stairs again, and there was baby Zach asleep. Looking closely at the monitor, she realized that somehow the signal being received was from another video camera. It was coming from the condo next door. She had lost the actual image of baby Zach, as the monitor had its signals crossed.

The Samaritan story has been misunderstood in our day. We have had our signals crossed. Easy assumptions cause us to miss the point. The story has been domesticated by some into a tale of how we should all be nice--and stop to help people with a flat tire. For others, the story has been spiritualized and said to symbolize the salvific work of Jesus, thereby emptying it of any moral guidance for us regarding neighborliness. What if this story is not about our being heroes who save another along the road or a foreshadowing of the passion story? What if we are the ones being saved through God's grace and the compassion of strangers? Could the compassion from, with, and for the stranger be a weapon of the Spirit whereby we regain the ability to be astonished, courageous, delighted, challenged, convicted and renewed to right relationship with God and neighbor?

How can we begin to comprehend the significance two millennia later? Professor Amy Jill Levine at Vanderbilt Divinity School questions many popular interpretations of this text. The idea that Priest and Levite avoid the stripped man for ritual purity reasons she says is misguided. This interpretation is used to critique religious leaders and often the Jewish faith by suggesting purity is given preference over compassion and ritual duties over neighborly responsibility. (Levine, Amy Jill. *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*. New York: Harper One, 2006, p. 145)

"To understand the parable in theological terms," she writes, "we need to be able to see the image of God in everyone, not just members of our group... To recognize the shock, and the possibility of the parable in practical, political, and pastoral terms, we might translate its first century geographical and religious concerns into our modern idiom... The man in the ditch is an Israeli Jew; a rabbi and a Jewish member of the Israeli Knesset fail to help the wounded man, but a member of Hamas shows him compassion. If that scenario could be imagined by anyone in the Middle East, perhaps there might be more hope for peace." (Levine, p. 148-149)

But wait, there is more. There are as many twists and turns in this story as there are on the Jericho Road itself. Kenneth Bailey noted that we have failed to recognize this as a *parabolic ballad* told with a poetic precision of language and structure. The action proceeds in recurrent patterns of seeing a situation and taking an action--or not. We can move on, go to the place or go to the person. It is a ballad of learning and action, knowledge and practice. Bailey reminds us of

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the way this story is woven into the larger text, and of a most powerful word in this text, the word “compassion.” This Greek word for compassion in the text suggests that upon seeing the misery of another human being and understanding the terror of the moment, the stomach, the intestines, the guts of the Samaritan are gripped and turned over with pity and concern. (Bailey, Kenneth. *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987. See especially Chapter 3 in *Through Peasant Eyes*.)

On April 3, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. used this parable story when he spoke of “Dangerous Unselfishness.” This was a sermon at the Mason Temple Church of God in Christ in Memphis, Tennessee. That’s right--this is the text used in his last sermon, preached on the night before he was assassinated. Dr. King suggests that it is when we come face to face with evil, compassion may call us forward but fear can keep us from doing what is right. Let me share the closing paragraph from this sermon: Dr. King says: “*That's the question before you tonight. Not, 'If I stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to my job?' Not, 'If I stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to all of the hours that I usually spend in my office every day and every week as a pastor?' The question is not, 'If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?' The question is, 'If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?' That's the question.*”

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests this care for the stranger, the foreigner, the oppressed ones runs deeply through substrata of the Hebrew Scriptures. He suggests that Deuteronomy demonstrates a “mandate for covenantal neighborliness.” Brueggemann notes a persistent call setting forth the Rules for Neighborhood Living that had been shoved aside by the urban elites in Jerusalem. (Brueggemann, Walter, from lectures given August 2-5, 2009 at Bay View Institute, Petoskey, Michigan.)

I confess that my enduring preoccupation with the story of the Samaritan neighbor comes from my reading of the social philosopher Ivan Illich, who continues to return to this story as a theme in his analysis of modern institutions and our misguided efforts to provide professional solutions to problems that require, first and foremost, a neighborly community and a commitment to common conviviality. Illich argues that there is within the human story an institutional counter-productivity.

He expresses this concern in a Latin phrase, “*Corruptio optimi quae est pessima.*” (The corruption of the best is the worst.) He states, “Through the attempt to insure, to guarantee, to regulate Revelation, the best becomes the worst. And yet, at any moment, we still have opportunities to recognize, even when we are Palestinians, that there is a Jew lying in the ditch whom I can take in my arms and embrace.” (Cayley, David. *Ivan Illich in Conversation*. Toronto: Anansi Press, 1992, p. 242)

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Illich helps us see that institutions almost inevitably evolve to a point where they produce the exact opposite of the function they claim. As he said, we have “stupid-making schools,” “iatrogenic medical systems,” and “crime-making justice systems.” John McKnight, a colleague of Illich, goes on: “This is because the system has displaced friendship, community, and the everyday habits of vernacular life. As the institutional bulldozer has leveled vernacular space... the horizon disappears. There is no perceived limit... There is no end, no home. There is the disappearance of mystery and surprise... the culture claims that everything can be understood.” (McKnight, John. *The Challenges of Ivan Illich*. Lee Hoinacki and Carl Mitcham, editors. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002, p. 50)

Ivan Illich suggests there are alternatives to this already available to us. That Christians celebrate their “we” with others in two great ceremonies of the faith. One was spoken of in the early church as *conspiratio*, the greeting of one another with the kiss of peace. The other is the sharing of a common meal, Holy Communion, or in Latin *comestio*. These two celebrations tie the relationship with God and neighbor together in a ritual act. (Cayley, David. *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich*. Toronto: Anansi Press, 2005, p. 208)

The word “conspiratio” is fascinating. Literally, it means “to breathe together.” It suggests that we partake of one Spirit together. There is also the notion that we are “conspiring” together toward something that is outside the normal everyday world of understanding. What is this conspiring? It is the suggestion that the outsider, the alien, the one given up for dead is, first and foremost, a neighbor.

In early Christian communities, the kiss of peace was an act that signaled that one was included in the community and this inclusion was possible for all: Jew, Greek, male, female, slave, free, circumcised and uncircumcised -- All. You see it was the practice in Roman city-states that a citizen in the public space could greet a stranger to the community with a kiss, and this would signal that the stranger was welcome and should be treated with honor and respect. (We could stop and reflect on another parable here--the father in Luke 15 greeting the prodigal son on his return home. There is the kiss that says this son, who was gone, estranged, no longer a part of my household, is now restored fully as my child ... but we must move on.) This public kiss was the “conspiratio,” the signal that the two are of one spirit. [It is a little like the giving of the tam to full professors.]

Ivan Illich was once asked, “Given what you suggest about institutions, what is the best way to make change, violent revolution or gradual reform?” Illich answered, “Neither. The best way to bring change is to give an alternative story.” (Cayley, David, in *The Rivers North of the Future*).

We have only begun to explore the remarkable, radical power of the story of the Philip Amerson, *The Surprising Neighbor*, University of Evansville Founders Day, 2/14/10, p. 7

Surprising Neighbor, but the lunch hour beckons us. And so, I want to close with a couple of alternative stories – I leave it to you and your holy imagination to determine how this might provide new insight and an ability to see clearly and act lovingly toward the stranger. You might ask what your place is in this parable.

Wes Jackson, environmentalist and founder of the Land Institute in Salina, Kansas, tells of the visit E.F. Schumacher made there in 1977. Jackson says we were “a fledgling organization scarcely six months old.” They were honored that Schumacher the widely acclaimed author would visit and give a public lecture. When Schumacher arrived, he did not dismiss this tiny organization that had recently experienced a devastating fire, destroying much of their early work. Instead, E. F. Schumacher listened patiently and insisted on being called Fritz. On the evening of the lecture, the Salina Community Theater was filled with farmers, small business owners and the unemployed, and Fritz began by telling of “a trip he had made during the 1930s with some friends in an automobile across America. He and his compatriots had stopped at a service station in some small Kansas town at the height of the Great Depression. Fritz engaged a local man at the station by asking, ‘How are things?’ ‘Fine,’ the local replied. ‘What is it you do?’ asked Fritz. ‘Oh, I work on that farm over there,’ he said pointing in the direction of the farm. ‘I used to own that farm but I had no money to pay the hired hand, so I paid him in land. Eventually he owned all of my farm and now I work for him.’

‘That is a very sad story,’ replied Fritz. ‘Well, not so sad,’ countered the hired hand. ‘Now my friend has no money either and so he is paying me back in land.’”
(Jackson, Wes, in *The Land Institute*, December 1999. See info@landinstitute.org)

John McKnight has written that in the time of the patriarchs, prophets and disciples: *In every household, in every tent, the door was open -- to the stranger, the outsider, the enemy, or potential enemy.*

And the stranger was one with whom one acted, not in service, but equality. Then a terrible thing happened in third-century Italy. At the side of a monastery, they built a little room for strangers. And they called it a hospice. The church took over responsibility for the stranger. And Christians forgot what had been unique about their community -- how to welcome the person who was outside and hungry.

The hospice took hospitality out of the community. “Hospice” became “hospital.” The hospital became Humana, a for-profit corporation buying up church hospitals. Communities and churches have forgotten about hospitality. Now systems and corporations claim they can produce it and sell it and that you can consume it. [John McKnight, from “Why Servanthood is Bad,” The Other Side, January/February 1989.]

Now, I have not come today to speak against hospice care. I know the value, as I

witnessed it during my father's death this past fall. Nor have I come to speak against schools or universities or to critique the criminal justice system or the institutional church, although each of these institutions has earned and deserves some significant critique and the prospect of an alternative story. Rather, I have come to suggest that the Samaritan story calls us to step back and consider how our various systems contribute in welcoming the stranger and how, by doing this, we find our truest and best selves. How does our knowledge and practice include those who are now excluded from the privileges we enjoy? I come to suggest that there is a danger that we can love our neighborhoods and not know our neighbors. It is to suggest that we can so easily step away from and forget the call to share meals together and to offer one another sincere greetings of peace. It is to say that we can fill this parable with a fuller sense of its rich meaning. It is to suggest that the cribs we see on the monitors of our mind's eye may be rebooted to find an actual and treasured child sleeping there.

And, like the Samaritan speaking with the keeper of the inn, we must pay forward. We should be covering the needs of the dispossessed and wounded today and make a pledge to return and pay for those who are strangers ready to be our neighbor. All of this is to say that we must stay on the journey and not give ourselves over to false senses of self-importance or a security, unwilling to know and welcome the stranger. It is saying that we who are people of faith need to continue on the journey.

Maya Angelou tells of her surprise when persons came and told her they had "become Christians." Her response was a one-word tour-de-force. She would simply say, "Already?" (Angelou, Maya. *A Song Flung up to Heaven*. New York: Random House, 2002.)

Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, where I labor and seek to keep an institution alive as a hospitable and forward-looking community, was founded in 1853, just one year before this university. Both schools were shaped by the vision that emerged a century earlier. In 1744 at a remarkable gathering of the early Methodist pastors, John Wesley asked that they focus on three questions as leaders of this emerging movement. Those questions are: "What shall we teach? How shall we teach? What shall we do?"

Don't these questions summarize the parable of the surprising neighbor and don't they call us to continue to grow and learn and develop as people of faith?

And echoing down the corridors of time we hear in reply: ***Do this and you shall live!***