

“Who Are Our Neighbors?”

[Luke 10: 25-37](#)

May the words I speak be those You want spoken, may the words we hear be those You want heard, may we live to Your glory. Amen.

Today I would like to talk about otherness. Otherness, is the quality or fact of being different.

Every one of us has our own unique life narrative. We live our lives from our own perspective. Some people we encounter, live lives that look similar to ours. They might have similar family structures, skin color, religious beliefs, educational opportunities, and other life experiences similar to our own. So we might think of those people as being “like us”. But when we encounter people who do not share these distinct similarities or shared understanding with us, they fall under the category of “other”.

My senior year of college, I had the opportunity to spend 4 months studying abroad in India. I got to travel around the country with 15 other students from my college and a professor. The height of the average woman in India is 5 feet. So needless to say as a 5 foot 11 inch, white, blonde female, I stood out. Our group visited some remote villages where the residents had never seen white people before. We got our pictures taken, a lot, by complete strangers. We were a minority, and yet we were often treated like celebrities.

During my time abroad, I was still living my life from own perspective. And so, even in that country of over 1 billion people, to me, everyone else was still the “other”. At least initially.

You see, what changed, is I got to really know the people I met. I got to hear their stories. I got to meet their families and visit their homes. I got to visit their temples, and celebrate their holidays and traditions with them. I got to learn about their lives.

Getting to know other peoples’ narratives is what broke down the barrier of “otherness”.

As children, we are taught to recognize things that are different. As kids grow, later on in the schoolyard, difference is often synonymous with weakness, and can become a cause of teasing or bullying. We learn to seek out and find acceptance from those who are like us. And it is easier for us to extend acceptance to those who we see as like us.

We fear the unknown and it causes anxiety and feelings of separation. Yet, our society is organized by otherness, particularly on matters of wealth, religion, sexuality, and political views.

Church is a place where we are constantly looking to challenge that paradigm, and it stems back to Jesus. In our gospel text today, Jesus is asked, “Who are my neighbors?” Jesus’ response to this question is to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus describes the Samaritan, due to his act of compassion, as being a neighbor.

In the Spark story Bible, which is the Bible our children use in Sunday School, the text says, “Jesus told him, “God wants us to help everyone. People of every size, shape, and color and from every country are important to God. Now go, and be like the Samaritan and help everyone who needs help.” Our ability to be a neighbor is not limited by geography. It can only be limited by the compassion we show to others.

Jesus didn't seek out those who were like him or close by to heal or show love to. Jesus sought out people he didn't know. He sought out the sick, imperfect, broken sinners. Jesus sought the "others." Jesus was their neighbor because he showed compassion.

Last week I got to experience my own Good Samaritan story. I was at the grocery store with my two children and had just finished loading the groceries and kids into our vehicle when I was approached by a woman. She asked if I had any money I could spare because she was hungry and just wanted to get something to eat.

For a moment I considered giving her something out of one of my own shopping bag, or giving her a small amount of money so she could buy herself a meal. But I decided there wasn't enough dignity in that. The more compassionate option I saw in the moment was to get my children out of their car seats, put aside my worry about the frozen items that were thawing in the car, and go in to the grocery store with the woman. I handed her a shopping basket and told her to fill it with whatever she needed.

I couldn't fix her situation, but I had compassion for that woman, and I hope in that moment I was being her neighbor. My children also got to witness it all. As we waited for the woman to gather her groceries, I explained to my kids what we were doing and why we were doing it. I told them what it means to be blessed, and how very blessed they are to have everything they need.

My children have never had to question where their next meal will come from. When they are hungry, they always have food available. When they are cold, they have an abundance of clothes to wear. When they are hurt or scared, they know their mom and dad will be there for them. This, sadly, is not the case for all children.

Today we are observing Children's Sabbath. Children's Sabbath is a way for faith communities to celebrate children as sacred gifts from God and provides the opportunity for places worship to renew and live out their moral responsibility to care, protect and advocate for all children.

This celebration is a part of a broader children's movement that aims to unite communities and religious congregations of all faiths across the nation in shared concern for children and a common commitment to improving their lives and working for justice on their behalf.

This year's Celebration theme is called "Children of Promise: Closing Opportunity Gaps" and focuses on closing opportunity gaps due to poverty and lack of access to high-quality early childhood development and a high-quality education so that every child can reach their God-given potential. For that to happen, we as people of faith need to stand tall within our communities and push our nation to keep our promises of love and justice, equality and dignity for all.¹

To help close this gap, we need to break the barrier of "otherness". In addition to tearing down walls that divide us, we must also celebrate our "oneness". We need to build relationships of unity and love. We to hear the narratives of others and attempt to see the world through their eyes. We need to start seeing everyone as a beloved child of God.

In our Sunday School, we are working hard to break the barrier of "otherness". But I'm going to be honest with you, we've still got some work to do.

Our Sunday School has a remarkable split of white European and west African students. It is about a 50/50 split. Last week I asked the teachers for some examples of how this idea of “oneness” is or isn’t happening inside of their classrooms.

One teacher responded by saying: “When the youth come into the room - there is a distinct separation as to where they are seated (I see this too in worship) - once everyone has chosen their spot the first time they come, they migrate to that spot time and again. African children on one side and everyone else on the other side. I try to mix them up for our lessons.”

Another teacher spoke of the community differences she sees. She said, “The African community are very connected to one another and the older children are much more involved with the younger ones.”

I would like to make it very clear that differences are a good thing, and should be celebrated. We are not all the same, and that shouldn’t be the goal. The goal is to have an understanding of one another.

And while we might not yet have that perfect understanding, we are getting there. We are getting there by being present together. We are getting there by sharing personal facts and stories about ourselves. We are getting there when both white and African students play soccer together after worship. We are getting there by learning the Bible stories together. By hearing the stories together and making them our own, we are building a shared foundation. It takes small steps like these to dismantle the walls of “otherness” that divide us.

Every time we focus on our “oneness”, like when we commune together as a whole church or when we worship together with New Creation, we are being the church and sharing in our mission together. We are tasked with the same goals - to “help everyone: people of every size, shape, and color from every country. To go, and be like the Samaritan and help everyone who needs help.” By encouraging opportunities of “oneness”, we are building our understanding and our compassion for one another. We are practicing being neighbors to one another.

As you go out into the world today, I would encourage you to ask yourself, how are you being an example for the children of this congregation and the world? How are you helping to bridge the gaps that divide us? How are you being a neighbor to others?

“Now go, and be like the Samaritan and help everyone who needs help.”

Amen.

ⁱ “National Observance of Children’s Sabbaths.” *Children’s Defense Fund*. Oct. 2016.