XIII TRINITY 2019
SERMON – SAINT JOSEPH PARISH
FATHER CRAIG LOONEY
ST. LUKE 10.23-37

✠

"Since we're neighbors, let's be friends" was the popular slogan for a supermarket chain. "Like a good neighbor" goes the insurance company jingle that promises "we are there". Just who are our neighbors?

We live in neighborhoods and we have neighbors who live next door and across the street and down the block. But many of us live our whole lives in our "neighborhoods" without knowing our neighbors' names, much less counting them among our friends.

The Gospel takes the idea of being a neighbor to a higher level...that of being neighborly. Jesus does what he often does to make his point...he tells a "once upon a time story". He sums it up by telling us to pay attention to what he says and take action.

The hero in today's story is a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans had a common ancestry; both were descendants of the great Patriarch Abraham. But by the 5th Century BC, Judaism and Samaritanism had become distinct and separate religions. Their dislike for each other is the stuff from which legends are made.

The lawyer in today's story is what our friend Father Hudson Stuck would call the professional religious person who thinks he knows everything there is to know about his religion. He asks Jesus what he has to do to get into heaven. He is hoping Jesus will say something he can use against him later. Instead, Jesus asks the lawyer to tell him what the Scriptures say.

"Love God with all your heart, mind and soul; and love your neighbor as yourself," answers the lawyer. "You are right," Jesus replies; "do this and you will get into heaven." That wasn't the answer the lawyer was expecting.

The lawyer tries to get Jesus to tell him exactly who is his neighbor. He was hoping Jesus would say anyone who was a carbon copy of himself, believed the same things he believed, and attended the same church, was his neighbor. He was hoping Jesus would narrow the playing field on who are our neighbors and how we are supposed to treat them.

In the Story of the Good Samaritan the priest and the Levite (a priest's helper) come across a man who was attacked, beaten up, stripped naked and left on the side of the road to die. Like the lawyer, they are the professional religious types. They both have important work in the Temple. But they are more concerned about looking good to others than doing a good deed. They choose to ignore the injured man and leave him to die.

The Good Samaritan in the story represents everything the lawyer despises. He doesn't believe the same things the lawyer believes. He doesn't attend the same church the lawyer attends. He doesn't think of the Samaritan as his neighbor. The Good Samaritan challenges his way of thinking. He challenges our way of thinking too.

Today we do have professional "good Samaritans" who often risk their own lives to help others. Paramedics, doctors, nurses, police officers and firefighters all serve as modern-day good Samaritans. A "good Samaritan" is someone who helps a complete stranger.

Not all of us have the capacity or training to be professional good Samaritans. We may be torn between compassion to help someone in distress and our own instincts for self-preservation. We may not want to get involved because we fear legal action if we do something wrong. But we do have the capacity to help people in other ways…and we shouldn't run from opportunities where we can do some good.

Jesus asks the lawyer who in the Story of the Good Samaritan acted like a neighbor...who acted neighborly? There is only one answer to the question...the one who showed a spontaneous act of kindness and went out of his way to help the injured man. He did the right thing!

The Story of the Good Samaritan challenges us to ask ourselves just how far are we willing to go to put the Great Commandment to love God with our whole being and love our neighbors as we want to be loved into practice. It's about being neighborly...to our neighbors.

We can start with the understanding everyone is our neighbor, not just the guy next door!

✠