

WHAT HOLDS ME BACK FROM BEING A NEIGHBOR TO OTHERS ?

The parable of the Good Samaritan told in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 10 verses 29-37 opens up a powerful teaching of Jesus. It is well worth reading because it identifies a neighbor as someone who is in need of our help. Jesus concluded the story of the Good Samaritan by asking the scholar of the law, "Which of the three (persons) in your opinion was neighbor to the robber's victim?" The response came, "The one who treated him with mercy." Then Jesus responded, "GO AND DO LIKEWISE." Pulling the beginning of this parable right up to the end of the parable we hear: "What must I do to inherit eternal life? GO AND DO LIKEWISE !"

Let us focus on the good Samaritan story with a new perspective...., It is a personal question for each of us. "What might hold me back from being a good neighbor to others? "What factors within me might lead me to feel hesitant or reluctant to reach out ?"

I invite each reader to carry this question in your heart today.

Let us discuss some broad areas of potential resistance to being a good neighbor to one in need. Here are six suggested hindrances. You may not identify personally with any of these hindrances. In that case I encourage you to enter your own search within yourself, and take this step with courage, without fear. Each of us can develop a personal plan to work around or work through our personal inhibitors.

The first of our proposed hindrances relates to vision or way of seeing things. It is actually simple; we need to have a broad vision or a certain alertness just to become aware of the needs of others and to recognize the call to be a neighbor to another person. Our lives are busy and we can be very focused on our own problems and goals and we naturally forget to look around at our neighbor.

"Lord, open my eyes."

The second inhibitor for some originates in how we see our relationship with others. The world today tells us that we should not get involved in the activity or lives of others outside of our families. This attitude would say that our personal life and that of our family members alone complete the circle of our concern in life. Understandably this somewhat narrow perspective on life will condition me not to look beyond myself and my family. I heard expressions of this attitude when I was young. But today we realize how interrelated our lives are and how interdependent we are. But even more we know that Christ calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Christ identified this as the second great commandment. But as an aide in

living this rule we are assured of Christ's assistance. He accompanies us as we reach out.

Now let us shift to a third source of inhibition to becoming neighbor. You and I hold a certain degree of anxiety concerning our future security and our future needs, or perhaps we maintain a strong focus on achieving a better standard of living or well being. We hear the messages and advertisements of our consumer culture repeatedly. And from these messages flows the suggestion that material items can bring a greater level of happiness, security, and a general well being. How can this interfere with my call to be a neighbor? Well, the material help that others may need and my openness to helping them could lessen my financial or material resources or security. Helping another could delay my progress in material development. I would like to tell you a personal story.

Many years ago I was in the military service and was assigned for one year in Korea. Our Army camp supported to some degree an orphanage that was nearby. I came to know its Korean Catholic director and his wife and a number of the children during the year I was in Korea. After I returned to the states Mr. Shim wrote to me occasionally and we still exchange Christmas cards. His totally unselfish service to the orphans will someday qualify him for sainthood.

But as I was beginning to my first job after leaving the military service I decide to save for specific things that I wanted. A car, a new stereo, and I wanted a cushion of savings so that I could eventually have my own apartment and furnishings.

Every few months Mr. Shim would write to me about the desperate conditions that continued at the orphanage. I knew his descriptions were accurate, I had seen them first hand, but I figured it was up to someone else to help him now that I was out of the military service. One day I received a letter from Mr. Shim describing a new cottage industry he desired to initiate to help support the children. He described a mechanical machine that would enable them weave mats from the locally plentiful rice straw. This would be sold. He just needed \$400 to purchase the machine and he was asking me if I could send him that amount. His request created a real struggle within me because of my desire to save for things I wanted.

As I thought about it during that week I realized that I was being moved by something within. Finally I decided to purchase s \$400 international money order. And I left the bank with a strange yet deep sense of joy in my heart. And that type of joy does not go away quickly. I knew those children

would have an opportunity for an improved life and also learn a locally needed skill. In the following three or four years that same scenario was repeated several times. While I admit that each time I received a letter requesting help I felt resistance. Yet by turning and becoming neighbor, God left me with a deep quiet joy inside. I now believe that God was orchestrating all of this just as God moves quietly through all of our lives.

One of those orphan girls now sits as a court judge in Seoul, and another boy became a university professor in Korea teaching political science. The graduates of that orphanage today support the new generation of orphans. God had great plans for Mr. Shim and his 200+ orphans and I was just one small instrument in that plan. While I admit that each time I received those letters I felt resistance to responding with help. Yet by turning and becoming a neighbor, God left me with a deep quiet joy inside.

I grew up in a family of six children. We always had what we actually needed but nothing extra, not even a family car until I was in college. But my grandmother and aunt always loaned us their car when we needed it. But in many families there is not always a generous friend or relative to help or to express generosity in times of need.

This leads me to a FOURTH related inhibition to become neighbor. If we grow up with some degree of material poverty and no one came along as a neighbor we may conclude that everyone has to take care of oneself only in life. That is the way it is. That person might enter adult life with the attitude: No one helped me when I was poor, so I'm not inclined to help others. This feeling may be even more intense if during life a person experienced an injustice. Perhaps you were slighted at times, or saw others receive preferential or more generous gifts or opportunities. Understandably, we may become guided more by a sense of strict justice in our adult life rather than embracing an other-centered generosity. It is a hidden or delayed form of jealousy. These experiences and feelings could become an obstacle to one becoming a neighbor, However, with the help of God I can overcome these experiences. If we ask God, God can heal our hearts giving us a more spontaneous generous heart.

You know that Jesus does not walk this earth any longer to personally perform miracles and to help people individually, yet it is his intention that his presence continues. HOW? You as a Christian are one of his stand-ins. You are one of his hands and part of his heart reaching out today. Where we go He is.

My fifth proposed hindrance to being a neighbor concerns whether I have a grateful heart. What do I mean? You and I can become happier and more positive about life if we step back occasionally to survey life as God's gift. Why am I even alive in this century? Reflecting on life as a wonder will lead us to a sense of gratitude to God for whom we are, gratitude for the fact that we even exist, for the opportunities we have had in life, for our families, your spouse, your children, and your grandchildren, for any material gifts life has afforded us, and most of all, it will lead us to gratitude for the forgiveness Jesus offered us from the cross. Jesus on the cross is God's ultimate sign of love for you, personally.

But, if I don't step back and reflect with appreciation on whatever good has come to me, I will find being a real neighbor to someone a little more of an uphill climb. The reason is that a genuine sense of gratitude leads us to a desire to respond with some form of "thank you." An attitude of gratitude moves the heart toward love and generosity. Just being alive and being forgiven are sufficient reasons to be grateful to God. My suggestion: stand on a hillside on a beautiful day and with an open heart and take an inventory of the positive aspects and experiences of your life. Do it monthly.

Now, let us look at another reality of life that might inhibit me from being a neighbor to someone. This is my sixth point for us to consider. You know, in truth, the diversity of the whole human family is a little challenging for the individual. We humans are so varied and different, and yet we are supposed to consider each other brothers and sisters. We are so varied in race, culture, religion, mannerisms, attitudes, material wealth, language and forms of government, even customs of privacy, and personal hygiene. And we all come under the effects of original sin. How could we possibly feel like sisters and brothers? We have problems because of our differences, but God doesn't. And God is the Father of all of us. Yet it feels like God is forcing us into his one family, and many times we are not truly comfortable with this reality. And human differences are not only able to make us uncomfortable. Some have also been a root cause of community conflicts and wars. "Love one another as I have loved you."

Well don't worry. Jesus can give us the grace to overcome our instinctive or learned prejudices if we are willing to ask for that grace, and willing to receive it. Yet it takes conscious and alert practice at being outgoing toward anyone who is different from myself. Many times there are hidden surprises when we make the effort.

My last parish assignment in New York City was quite diverse racially and ethnically. The parish census revealed that our parishioners and were first generation Americans having come from over 70 countries. There was no ethnic or racial majority and it was one of the most peaceful parishes I have served in.

We had 400 students in our school representing every shade from white to light brown into black. I taught once a week the religion class for the 5th and 6th graders. The students reflected the parish diversity . And there were in every class a few students whose families were not Christian. I may have felt self-conscious at times in front of the class , but the children were not. I remember mid-way through the school year one student put his hand up to ask a question. When I called on him he said, " I finally figured out which country you were born in. I can tell by your accent." Trying to suppress my smile I asked him to tell me where he thought I was born. And he said, "You were born in Ireland, we can tell your Irish accent." I couldn't hold back the smile any more. I told him I was born in Pittsburgh, and what they were hearing was my Pittsburgh accent. "Where is Pittsburgh?" Is that in another state", he asked. It's 400 miles west of NYC in the state of Pa. He gave me a Father's day card shortly before I left the parish. Children can learn to be comfortable with our human differences.

I want to tell a story on myself about how aversions to some who are different and forming judgments about others might keep us from being fully a neighbor.

In the mid 1990's I was a Passionist seminary student in urban Chicago. Every seminarian was expected to volunteer in some ministry outreach activity once a week. In this final year before ordination I had already taken final vows as a Passionist, including the vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience and our Passionist vow to Preach the Passion of Christ.

I chose as my ministry to volunteer in a shelter for the homeless. Initially I worked in a small shelter for homeless teenagers. And then transferred to a shelter for homeless adults which was in the process of being developed by a religious sister. The shelter was in the finished basement room of a Lutheran church and it could accommodate up to 50 persons. As a volunteer my duties were to help serve an already prepared evening meal, to welcome each homeless person as he or she arrived and to help them feel comfortable and accepted. Much of our time was spent talking individually with the homeless , listening to their stories and

struggles, and if we could see an opportunity to help them we would do some follow up work.

For the most part none of the homeless persons knew me, nor that I was a seminarian, only that I was Pat, a volunteer. Because the shelter had to be a smoke free area we had to provide them an outside smoke break every half hour or so. And each volunteers like myself took a turn standing outside with the smokers just to make sure nothing inappropriate or destructive to property occurred. I learned many things about these hidden faces in our cities. One homeless person I remember was Mike who was probably in his 40's. Mike always seemed to arrive late. And it required some extra effort to get a meal for latecomers if the serving time had already passed. Many of the homeless as you might expect looked quite disheveled and dirty. Mike was the ultimate in both. You could not tell the color of his clothing. It had taken on the color of the dirty of the city of Chicago. His hair had not been cut for years, nor apparently combed during that interval. He had a full bushy beard that was tangled and dirty as were his face and hands. But most of all he always had a strong odor. That was always what was most difficult for me. If he walked through the room you could tell where he had been because of the lingering odor.

One very cold winter evening an hour or so after the shelter opened I saw Mike entering the main door. I was standing on the opposite side of the large room. The first thought that went through my mind was that I didn't want to go over and greet him, as was my responsibility. I just didn't want to experience the odor or shake his always very dirty hands. My immediate thought was to act as if I had not noticed his arrival, and to wait for another volunteer to approach and greet him. In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan I was like the two who passed by the victim walking intentionally on the other side of the road. That is exactly what happened and I watched as another male volunteer approached Mike, welcomed him, and asked him if he wanted a cup of coffee. The Good Samaritan. I was relieved that someone else took care of Mike for my sake, but I felt uncomfortable because of my less than fully charitable attitude. Ten or fifteen minutes later I made a well planned and executed brief approach to Mike to say hello and then moved away quickly.

Later that evening it became my turn to step outside with the smokers and remain with them for about 10 minutes. Winters can be very brutal in Chicago because of the infamous winds of that city. That night was a classic of piercing cold wind. I had a good heavy winter coat, which always served me well. As I stood outside with the huddle of 5-6 smokers I noticed how

much lighter and thinner their coats seemed than mine. Mike was among the smokers. As I stood there I began to really feel cold. The wind found every small fold or opening in my coat and I began to shiver. All I could think of was that these homeless men spent most of the day outside in the cold constantly "moving on " to avoid the police and stares of people. How could they possibly tolerate the cold of one day, let alone a whole winter !! As I stood there shivering my private thoughts just blurted out almost unexpectedly. I just said, "How can you live outside in this terrible cold ?" There were a few seconds of silence, and I wondered if it would have been better had I not brought up the subject. Then one of the homeless men responded to me.

It was Mike. I will always remember his words. He answered me, "The way I see it, Jesus suffered terribly on the cross for my sins. I figure the least I can do is to put up with this cold." There was silence in the group. And I was in humble awe of him. And I said nothing. I had nothing worthy to add. Here was the man I was deliberately trying to avoid because he was offensive to me, and yet he held a treasure within him. He held a deep appreciation for Christ and understood Christ's sufferings. Mike had spontaneously preached the Passion of Christ and I, unknown to that smokers' group, was the one who had taken a vow to preach Christ's passion as a sign of God's love. He responded respectfully to me and with simple words preaching Christ's Passion.

I felt humbled in the presence of one of God's cherished sons. Why had I felt reluctant to move outside my range of comfort ? Why had I allowed myself to be so put off by Mike's externals that I did not want to be a neighbor?

God engineered the timing of that experience so that I could learn to accept all of his children even those outside my comfort zone.

"Love one another as I have loved you."

When we act as a neighbor to someone we bring Christ's voice, his hands, his feet, his heart to that person.

You may not reflect consciously on that reality at the time you are serving another person, but Christ can still work through you. Working through us seems to be God's preferred way of interacting in our world. If we become gradually conscious of the reality of God working through us we will experience a new joy.

I would like to offer a passage from the First letter John third chapter, verses 16-18.

From the Desk of Patrick Geinzer, C.P.

“ The way we came to know love was that he laid down his life for us; so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers (others). If someone who has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him compassion how can the love of God remain in him? Children, let us love not in word or speech, but in deed and truth.” Be another Christ. Be a good neighbor.