

Faith Mennonite Church
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Bending and extending the rules of faith

Luke 10:25-37; James 2:14-26

It's an old argument among church folks: which is more important--what we believe or what we do? Faith or works? Orthodoxy or orthopraxy? The debate will probably never be settled since the diversity of texts in the Bible can support both sides, and Christians seem prone to do just that: take sides! But today's texts from Luke and James suggest that the question itself is wrong; this is not an either-or proposition. Faith that is grounded in a deep love for God *will* spill over in love for others. Loving our neighbors and acting for their good moves us closer to the heart of God where our faith and trust lie.

Shelly shared with the children the story of the "Good Samaritan." Luke tells this story in a most interesting way. It begins with a lawyer who stands up to test Jesus by asking the question "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus returned the question and asked the man what was written in the law--which he should know as a lawyer!--which appears at first glance to be an orthodoxy response. The lawyer responds with the same verse that on other occasions Jesus used to answer the question of which is the greatest commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus replies, "Bingo! You got it right (orthodoxy). Now *do* this and you will live" (orthopraxy)! Most of us would say "Thank you, Jesus! Question answered," and leave at this point. But, in good lawyerly fashion, this man needs to define the terms so he knows precisely what he has to do. "And *who*," he asks, "*is* my neighbor?" We can be grateful for his persistence because it resulted in one of our best-loved stories that Jesus told. And, of course, because Jesus told it, it is a story with a twist.

I imagine the lawyer was looking for a specific formula, the kind of discreet measure and limit that the rabbis established for every imaginable set of circumstances that one might get oneself into. It's reassuring to know *exactly* what is expected--what is allowed and what is prohibited. The rabbis might have come up with a square-foot or square-mile delineation to define the area that encompasses our neighborhood--the abode of our neighbors. But Jesus wasn't the ordinary rabbi. He didn't hold to narrow, well-defined boundaries. The story he tells as an answer to the question isn't even set in a neighborhood, or in the olive groves or sheep pastures surrounding the neighborhood. He takes this lawyer on an imaginary journey, a good, long, hike to a dangerous road between Jerusalem and Jericho. The neighbor isn't a traveling companion telling good jokes (or bad puns) but a stranger, someone whose been mugged by robbers and left to die.

At this point in the story, Jesus makes a subtle switch. Remember the original question: "Who is my neighbor?" In the last half of the story Jesus switches the attention away from who the neighbor is who needs love and care and toward how a good neighbor acts. The first two persons Jesus mentions, the priest and Levite, are ones we'd expect to be good neighbors, to get it right. But, alas, their right beliefs and attention to the law keep them from being neighborly. It may not have been clear whether the person crumpled up along the side of the road was alive or dead. If he were dead or bleeding, the priest and Levite would have become ritually impure had they touched him, and thus unable to carry out their religious responsibilities. Their right beliefs,

in essence, kept them from being neighborly. The Samaritan who came along next didn't seem to be burdened with these concerns but simply, instinctively, came to the man's aid. Jesus asked the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The verdict was fairly obvious: "The one who showed him mercy." And to this, Jesus replied, "Go and do likewise."

Behind this story and the lawyer's final response we hear an echo of the words of God, spoken through the prophet Hosea: "I desire mercy not sacrifice" (6:6). And there's another echo here as well: of God using a person outside of the religious mainstream to bring home a point. In this story, Jesus elevates a Samaritan as the model of right practice, of faithful action. The verses we read from the book of James sounds a similar echo when the writer holds up Rahab the prostitute together with Abraham the revered patriarch as equal models of right action that proved their faith. Tradition has it that the book of James was written by James of Jerusalem, a brother of Jesus. Perhaps he was remembering Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan as he wrote these words.

One story, of course, no matter how good it is, doesn't answer all of our contemporary questions about how to respond in a neighborly way to homeless pan-handlers at intersections, to the millions of displaced persons in and outside of Syria, to the many refugee families who have resettled in our community. But the Luke and the James passages point us toward a disposition, an attitude of openness and compassion toward persons in need *and* of learning from and partnering with people we might not automatically expect to be our teachers in the ways of neighborliness.

Both aspects of this disposition have certainly been at the heart of the history and experience of Mennonite Central Committee, the organization that many of us were supporting through our volunteering and bidding and buying (and yes, eating!) yesterday at the Festival and Sale up in Brooklyn Park. MCC was created in 1920 at a time when Mennonites lived in fairly close-knit communities and viewed their neighbors primarily as other Mennonites. When word came to the US and Canada that Mennonites who had earlier migrated from Europe to the Ukraine were being devastated by famine and brutal attacks in the wake of World War I and the Russian revolution, North American Mennonites wanted to send aid. To do so they formed what became known as Mennonite Central Committee. [This rather lackluster name that sounds a bit like a communist organization (!) was purely functional: Orrie Miller, the young man invited by various Mennonite groups to be their envoy to Russia, accompanying the aid, agreed to that assignment with one stipulation: that he would report to a single group. Thus the Mennonite *Central* Committee was formed.]

What was originally intended as a short-term project to aid Mennonite neighbors in Russia, developed and grew into an organization with a longevity that none of the founders would have imagined. Over the years the notion of *who* constituted the neighbor in need of aid and *how* that aid should be rendered changed again and again. As MCC expanded its focus beyond aiding traditional Mennonite communities who had fallen on hard times, to working in situations where colonialization had left large portions of the population exploited and impoverished, simply transferring material aid from the wealthy to the needy was not sufficient. MCC began to recognize the need for communities to increase their educational and productive capacities, following the now familiar adage: Give a person a fish and they eat today; teach a person to fish and they eat a lifetime. So MCC worked in the area of community development which included work in education, health, agriculture, and business-generation. Yet these efforts have often been thwarted by situations of conflict and, increasingly, by forces of globalization.

So MCC has adapted and focused resources on peacemaking and advocacy. These shifts have not happened in a neat progression where successive forms of activity have fully replaced former methods; the need for material aid after a natural disaster, or in the midst of war, still exists. MCC continues to send material aid. And the work of development and capacity-building continue, along with peace-building projects and advocacy for justice in international policies.

Along the way and over the years, MCC embraced a mandate to respond to human need regardless of whether "the neighbor" was within Mennonite or even Christian communities, as programmatic work and volunteers spread to every continent. While North American volunteers continue to serve with MCC around the world, they almost always now work alongside national partners wherever they go. Several years ago, MCC underwent a significant reorganization that places its international work more fully in the context and under the accountability of these national partnerships.

I'm grateful for my personal experience in the 1980s of serving and learning with MCC. I'm glad that our congregation can support the ongoing ministry of MCC and the way it connects us to people, the global church, and to needs all over the world. And I'm glad that we continue to wrestle with the question of how to put our faith into action, how to be people of compassion here in the Twin Cities, moved by our trust and faith in God and moved by love for our neighbors. Let us continue to "Go and do likewise."