THE $64,000 QUESTION

I’ve probably read the parable of the Good Samaritan a hundred or more times. But this past week when I read it, as I was researching and preparing to write this message, something in the very first line of the story suddenly jumped out at me. Something I’d never paid attention to or thought anything about, until now.

“An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus.” He stood up. Which implies, of course, that this legal expert had been sitting down beforehand. And that, to me, indicates that Jesus told this well-known parable, not outside, in the midst of a crowd of people gathered around him on some street corner (which is how I had always envisioned the scene), but rather inside a synagogue, amongst a group of attentive worshippers and learners.

You see, the custom of the synagogues back in Jesus’ day was to appoint someone to read a portion of the Hebrew Scriptures (what we know as the Old Testament), and then offer a commentary on it (nowadays we call such a commentary a “sermon”).

And while the appointed teacher, which it seems Jesus was that day, read from the sacred scroll that contained the word of God and extrapolated its meaning for the congregation, those who were present in the sanctuary would sit in their seats, listening and contemplating what they were being told, speaking out and making informed comments, and asking probing questions.

They weren’t being rude. Actually, that was their job: to make the rabbi’s lesson in the synagogue a two-way dialogue. The listeners were supposed to challenge or “test” the rabbi’s teachings, to assess his wisdom and his understanding, to get more clarification or ask for further explanation, the purpose being to see if what he was saying held up under close scrutiny and was faithful to God’s Word and Law.

Anyone who is familiar with the Gospel stories knows that that’s something the Scribes, Pharisees and lawyers did to Jesus all the time. They were constantly asking Jesus questions, to see if he was the real deal.

If the event we read about in Luke’s Gospel this morning did take place in a synagogue setting, as I believe it did, it would explain something that has long puzzled me: why this lawyer guy suddenly and inexplicably arose from his seat and blurted out a question that, to me, seemed to come out of nowhere. “An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. ‘What must I do to inherit eternal life?’”
Wait a minute. What’s going on? Where did this legal expert come from? What was he doing there among Jesus’ audience? And what was his motivation for testing Jesus? Did he have some ulterior, unscrupulous motive? Or was there a reasonable and legitimate reason for challenging Jesus?

I’d like to think it was the later. If so, the event may have happened like this.

On one occasion, an expert in the law was sitting in the synagogue, listening to Jesus teach. After listening for a time to his discourse on the Kingdom of God, he stood up to test Jesus’ religious views. “Teacher, what you’re saying to us is intriguing. But there’s something I don’t fully understand and I’d really like to know. So please tell me, what do I have to do to be allowed into this Kingdom of God you’re teaching us about and inherit eternal life?”

I’ll bet murmurs of agreement rippled through the congregation. Most likely the people there turned to each other and whispered, “I was wondering the same thing myself. I’m glad someone took the initiative and asked that question.”

Yes, Jesus. What must I do to inherit eternal life?

I imagine Jesus letting the question hang in the air for a moment or two, while everyone in the synagogue waited in the tense silence for his response.

And how did Jesus respond?

Well, maybe you’ve heard of the Socratic method of schooling. The Greek philosopher and teacher Socrates liked to instruct his students by having them ask and answer questions to stimulate critical thinking and draw out new ideas and fresh knowledge. Jesus most likely wasn’t aware of Socrates and his way of educating, but he often used the same method with his students by answering their question with another question so they could come to their own conclusion. That’s why, to the lawyer’s inquiry about how he might attain eternal life, Jesus responded by asking him, “What does it say in the law? How do you read it?”

That was an easy, puffball kind of question for a legal expert, and I’m sure Jesus knew that. But there was a reason he asked. Jesus was leading the lawyer to answer his own question. And that’s exactly what the lawyer did when he said, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’. And ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“See?” said Jesus. “You knew the answer all the time. Just do what you already know to be right. Love God with all of your being, and love
your neighbor as yourself, and you won’t go wrong.”

To the credit of that lawyer, he didn’t break off the dialogue at that point. He didn’t say, “Okay, that’s what I thought the answer would be. I’m good with that. Thanks, Jesus.” No, that legal expert wanted to delve deeper. He wanted to explore what Jesus was teaching in a little more detail. So, to the question Jesus asked in response to his question, the lawyer asked another question, regarding the vague part of the law that said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Because, you see, that’s a gray area. Who is my neighbor? We’re not always totally clear about that.

Now, let’s turn the question on its head and inquire about what we really want to know. Who’s not my neighbor? Who are the people in the world whom it’s okay to dislike? Who can I rightly and acceptably give the cold shoulder to?

Who is it okay to knock down and spit on because they’re not as good as I am? Because their faith is wrong. Because their religion is dangerous? Who can I rightly prevent from entering my country? Who can I justifiably go to war against, with the righteous and acceptable goal of bombing them into the stone age?

I think that’s what that expert in the law was really asking. I think that’s what he really wanted to know.

Jesus, who’s not my neighbor?

And don’t we ask the same question of Jesus? Don’t we want to know, as well? Jesus, who’s not my neighbor?

Hopefully not the Somali family that lives down the street, who dress funny and speak in an accent I can barely understand.

Or the gay couple I saw holding hands at the restaurant where I had dinner last night.

Or the transgender person who wants to use the same restroom I use.

Or the Hispanic lady who cleaned my hotel room and changed my sheets, who is almost certainly in this country illegally and should be sent home.

Or my conservative or liberal coworker who is really difficult to get along with and irks me to no end as the election draws closer.

Or, God forbid, Muslims, who are all planning terror attacks and whose only goal is to wage jihad and plot how to kill innocent people every time they go to their mosque to worship—or so they say they worship there.

None of those people are my neighbors, right Jesus? So I get a pass on having to love them, wouldn’t you say?
That’s the question the lawyer was actually asking. Who’s not my neighbor? But he couched that true question, the question he really wanted to ask, in the guise of a more benign and innocent inquiry: “And who is my neighbor?” the lawyer asked.

Jesus knew what the lawyer genuinely wanted to know. And that’s when he knew it was story time.

In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But then a Samaritan came by.

We all know what a Samaritan was back then, right? We all understand what that Samaritan represented in Jesus’ parable. Samaritans were members of a religious group that were as loathed by the Jews back in Jesus’ day as undocumented immigrants, members of the LGBTQ community, people of color and Muslims are despised by many people today.

This Samaritan, as he traveled, came to where the bruised, beaten, almost dead man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine to disinfect the wounds. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii—two days wages—and gave them to the innkeeper. “Look after him,” he said, “and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.”

Then Jesus asked the $64,000 question. “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

It was . . . uh, I guess it was the guy who helped the man in need. The lawyer couldn’t even bring himself to say the word “Samaritan.” And I imagine the legal expert’s mind thought something like, “Oh, darn. I wanted to know who’s not my neighbor. And it would seem that no one isn’t.”

Or, to answer the question using better and more understandable English: Who is my neighbor? It would seem that everybody is.

My friends, we go about our lives as Christians, presumably trying to follow Jesus to the best of our ability; but at the same time we watch the news or simply look around us and see the horrific things that happen in our community, our State, our country and the world, we see people who do terrible things, and we feel deep pain, anger, grief and helplessness because of it.

And we also experience inner conflict. Because suddenly, the
the command of our Lord to love our neighbors as we love ourselves collides with the reality of our own emotions, prejudices and fears. And we find ourselves in a quandary. We feel a great tension between what Jesus tells us to do—love your neighbor—and the fact that we really don’t want to do that. In fact, in many cases we refuse to do that.

But if we listen closely, sincerely and prayerfully, to the Holy Spirit whispering to us in the silence of our hearts, and hear the sacred words of the Scriptures and the sermon messages and the prayers that are spoken in our church, and pay attention to our God-given consciences, then we, like the expert in the law who stood up to test Jesus, will hear the $64,000 question that we really don’t want to respond to, but we’re forced to hear because we’re followers of Christ. And the answer to that question is an answer we simply don’t want to concede to.

Tell me, Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?”
And while you’re at it, tell me also, “Who’s not my neighbor?”
And Jesus responds, “I don’t think you’re going to like my answer, but here it is.”

After two upstanding, religious people passed by a severely injured man, lying on the side of the road from Jerusalem to Jerico, a Samaritan . . . or maybe it was a Hispanic who’s not in our country legally . . . or a person of color . . . or a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender person . . . or a person who is to the left or to the right of you politically . . . or a Muslim . . . as he traveled, came to where the needy and incapacitated Jew . . . or God-fearing Christian . . . or patriotic American was.

And when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he . . . brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two [days wages] and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’ “Which of those three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

We all know the answer to the $64,000 dollar question. We know who the “neighbor” was. And, like it or not, and whether it’s acceptable to us or not, we know who our neighbor is.

Our neighbor is humankind. Our neighbor is everyone we encounter while traveling down the road from Jerusalem to Jerico, or the road from Scarborough to Portland, or to Gorham, or to Saco, or South Portland, or Biddeford, or wherever we go in our lives. So, may we go and do as the Samaritan did, and as Jesus taught us, and love all of our neighbors as we love ourselves. Amen.