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The Neighbor

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The Neighbor

Behind much of this issue is the question of the lawyer to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” As is clear from the Lucan parable, the lawyer wants to ask the question as a means of testing Jesus, and of defining the limits of obligation. Like us (often) the lawyer wants to know, to be sure, that his neighborly obligations are somehow limited—certainly there must be a limit to that ancient (even in those days) imperative to be a host, and to take care of those in need. Arising from that far-distant period when the Israelites were wandering nomads in the desert, hospitality to the stranger was quite often a matter of life and death, thus caring for the neighbor in need was an ethical absolute. It was even a question of survival, as you never knew when you might in turn be that neighbor in need. But even in the agrarian village society of Jesus’ day, it seemed that there were too many neighbors, too many folks in need, crowding in and demanding attention; “compassion fatigue” might be a modern term, but it certainly could describe the situation in Jesus’s day, as well.

If the society in first-century Galilee differed from the era of the Old Testament patriarchs, how much more different is our twenty-first-century technological society! Now, with the media, the images of suffering neighbors around the world are beamed directly to us through our electronic media, and they are overwhelming, to say the least. To read reports of people suffering from war or hunger is one thing, but to be confronted with them in a starkly visual form is another. And our relative safety and ease is not only invaded digitally, but in person, as those neighbors from so far away come to our shores and into our towns. What can the concept of a needy neighbor mean when there are literally billions of them? Are we secretly with that biblical lawyer, wondering about the limits of our own obligation? It is a question without any easy solution; perhaps even asking the question is problematic.

Conversely, the very technology that brings to us daily the needs of our neighbors around the globe is also the very factor that works to insulate us from those who are our more immediate neighbors. When you can “friend” and “unfriend” people at will, shutting them out of your consciousness at will, it is far too easy to limit your social access to those who will not make too intense demands on your time and your space. Those who study modern Western society suggest that while our most immediate social bonds of family and friends remain relatively strong, as do our (selected) bonds to national and even international causes, it is

those intermediate social bonds that have suffered so greatly since the middle of the twentieth century. We do not have the formal ties to our neighbors on the block, in the town, in the region that we used to. Those organizations that used to draw different people together, the clubs, service organizations, even churches, have all declined, and in some places have declined dramatically. The level of invective and coarseness in our national deliberations is one indicator of the fact that far too often we do not see the “other” as our neighbor—as someone to whom we are obligated, and who is obligated to us. In religious terms, this is sin—self-centeredness that draws us away from God and our neighbor.

Can our congregations be the means by which we start to repair this decline? Can we as Christians model a self-sacrificial ministry to the neighbor around us, even if it means calling the problem what it is—sin and self-idolatry? It is tempting to frame all of this in a self-concerned fashion—we need to pay attention to our neighbors so that we can get them to join our churches (which, in and of itself, isn’t necessarily a bad thing). But beyond this, we are commanded by Christ to know and help our neighbors simply because they are our neighbors, and they need our assistance (as we will need their assistance). Perhaps we need to stop thinking so much about it and start doing much more about it—that might be what Jesus would tell us.

—M.G.