

Dear friends in Christ



July 10, 2022, 5 Pentecost

“Just Who is Neighbor?”

The Rev. Dr. John C. Forney, St. Francis Episcopal Mission

Deuteronomy 30:9-14; Psalm 25:1-9; Colossians 1:1-14;

Luke 10:25-37

Upon arriving home, I noticed a flyer that slipped out of our local Claremont newspaper. It concerned a proposed development to provide housing for the neediest amongst us. Larkin Place is to be a supervised residence providing housing for the unhoused. Of course, some of these folks will have problems with substance abuse. Many will have various degrees of mental illnesses. Some will be returning from incarceration.

When I saw this broadside, it was more like “Monsters on Maple Street.” Something out of Rod Sterling’s dark imagination. Or maybe “Zombie Apocalypse.”

Our peaceful community – read WHITE – would be invaded by the most distorted forms of humanity. Druggies, the insane – insane slashers?? – an unreformed criminal element setting to prey upon our nearby school children.

Yes, right “next to kids’ soccer fields, Joslyn Senior Center, El Roble Intermediate School, a preschool...” Right! Zombie Apocalypse!

And whoever these dregs of human society might be, we CERTAINLY DON'T WANT THEM AS NEIGHBORS! Not OUR neighbors.

Send them off to Pomona. Send them off to L.A. Just keep them out of Claremont.

This was a call to "Take Action." "Save Claremont!"

The project developer, Jamboree Housing Corporation, has a track record of successfully providing low-income housing to seniors, veterans and the homeless. Their supervised "Permanent Supportive Housing" in Orange County is exemplary. Their efforts have brought hope and ended homelessness with solutions that work.

They've held a number of community-wide meetings here in Claremont, but to no avail. As the Good Book says, "Those with ears to hear, let them hear." Well, the shouters and nay-sayers seem to have heard not much of those presentations. Still – Monsters on Elm Street.

You know, we all know, the paradigmatic story of neighbors Jesus tells in Luke's gospel. "Just then a lawyer (wouldn't you know it – a lawyer -- Had to be a lawyer!) stood up to test Jesus." Wanting the quick and easy answer to salvation. So, what need he do to enter the Kingdom of God?

And when Jesus throws the question back at him, the man responds exactly as he had been taught in Sabbath School. "Love God and love Neighbor."

Right. He gets an "A" from the rabbi. So, what's the problem? Just do it.

Not wanting to look diminished in the eyes of the gathering crowd, the lawyer retorts, "Just who is neighbor?"

Whereupon Jesus launches into a story. So famous that the hero, the "Good Samaritan" lives on in legend and as moral exemplar down through the ages. Of course, it was the one who actually provided aid, who bandaged up the assaulted traveler and saw to his housing.

When folks protest the work of House of Hope to bring healing to those suffering addiction, to cries that we should locate somewhere else – anywhere else, this is my response.

These people are already here. You see them living in tents on the streets, on the bike trail, in empty lots. They're already here.

Would you rather they be tucked safely in their beds at 9:00 o'clock at night in a supervised facility providing recovery, where they're learning the work of sobriety? Or would you rather encounter them in your living room at 2:00 in the morning, or in a parking lot on the wrong end of a gun? They're already here.

People, these are your neighbors. They're here. They're hurting. They're desperate. Your choice.

Here's today's update of Jesus' parable:

A group of city fathers and mothers on a stroll through the Village came upon a most unsightly scene. People sleeping on the sidewalks and in the parks. Actually, they noticed the smell before they saw the tents and sleeping bags and cardboard lean-tos.

Some, long established residents, fretted, "This is going to bring down property values. I worked hard for my home. This riffraff is ruining my investment. It's unsightly. It smells. They smell." These fine citizens called the city council demanding action.

Another group, a couple on the city council, were likewise aghast. "We aren't going to get re-elected if these people swarm the city. We've got to get rid of them. Send the cops out to let them know in no uncertain terms that they'd better be gone by sundown. OR ELSE."

"And forget that resolution the do-gooders are pushing for inclusionary housing. We definitely are NOT for including THESE people. Let's pass an ordinance outlawing these deplorables and their shanties." "Oughta be a Law!"

Finally, a sanitation worker and some police officers came by. "This is unsanitary. These people are using the alley and bushes for their

bathroom. Their panhandling is driving away business. The crime rate is on the rise. Ship them off to Pomona. Anywhere, but not here. Definitely –“Oughta be a Law!”

Then along came some folks and when they saw the squalor, and listened to the pain and distress of those living on the sidewalks, their hearts were moved with pity. They provided shelter at a local church. When they realized that this was at best a temporary band-aid solution, they found an empty lot and convinced the owner to make it available for a more permanent solution – a solution that would address the underlying problems of addiction, mental illness, impoverishment, and flat-out bad luck.

They found a developer, drew up plans, talked and talked and talked to their neighbors. They attended meeting after meeting. They fought like hell to persuade the persuadable and rally allies. And they still are.

That's because they recognized their neighbors as people like themselves. People deserving a break, people deserving healing, people with the same dreams, the same hopes -- the same right to respect and a decent livelihood. Neighbors, in short.

As our nation is further polarized by recent political events and the rulings of our Supreme Court, the stress on national neighborliness is at the breaking point -- definitely at the fracture point. About the only thing still holding us together, the only thing we can agree on, this past Fourth of July, was the fireworks -- in communities where we could actually shoot them off without fear of burning the place down.

As the January 6th Committee delves further into the potential criminality of the Former Guy, half the country is either not paying attention, or has dismissed it all as “Fake News.” Nothing to see here, folks, just move along.

So how do we put it back together? America is presently a pretty smashed-up Humpty Dumpty. Jon Mecham fears that if we break America, we won't get it back.

If our nation is to survive, the definition of “neighbor” must be, in our global community, far more expansive than someone living up the street. Or across town.

As Hitler was marshalling his forces to subdue Europe, magazine empire oligarch -- publisher of Time-Life -- Henry Luce wrote an editorial destined to shape American foreign policy for the next one hundred years, “The American Century.”

Therein he assumed that America, in a unipolar world, would be the essential neighbor keeping the peace and creating a world safe for global capitalism and democracy.

We should ... “accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world and . . . exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit.”¹

Over the years, it hasn’t worked out that way. Through one intervention, one ruinous war after another, our misguided support of despots has only created more death than had we left well enough alone. The gospel of Matthew’s “City on a Hill” has morphed into an “Armed Metropolis.”² Such a neighbor!

The principles of this so called “liberal Internationalism,” as articulated by Woodrow Wilson, seem not to have made us any safer; only poorer and, under a despot like Trump, more isolated and feared.

Those promoting what has been called a more circumscribed foreign policy, the “Restrainers,” say it’s time for a lighter American footprint on the world’s stage. The evidence has not supported a foreign policy of robust intervention.

Daniel Bessner writes, “Since the late Seventies, Americans have been suffering the negative consequences of empire—a militarized political culture, racism and xenophobia, police forces armed to the teeth with military-grade weaponry, a bloated defense budget, and endless wars—

¹Henry Luce, quoted in Daniel Bessner, “What Comes after the American Century?” *Harpers Magazine*, July 2022.

² Ibid.

without receiving much in return..."³ What Chambers Johnson calls, the "Sorrows of Empire."⁴

The historian Paul Thomas Chamberlin estimates that we have racked up over twenty million deaths in Cold War conflicts – the "equivalent of 1,200 deaths a day for forty-five years."⁵

As pundits, in the days following the celebration of our nation's birth, ponder our American legacy and what to make of it all, Jon Mecham and Joe Scarborough sufficiently nailed it for me. At least for the moment.

Joe, interviewing Jon, pondering the promise and hope of America, related a comment which answered his question, -- on Twitter Joe had asked: "Even with all our flaws, why are you proud to be an American?" One of his favorite replies was by a Joe Reynolds: "When you're some small person with your back against the wall - a natural disaster, a political prisoner, a pandemic, you don't say, 'maybe India will help us, or maybe China. You say maybe America will help.' We don't always live up to that, but we should."

Joe then turned the question back to Jon who responded: "I'm proud to be an American for same reason [that] I'm proud to be a human being. I know that I am capable of great evil, and great shadow and great darkness. But I also know that there are days and moments when there's light and life and love. If we can just get there fifty-one percent of time, then we're having a good day.

What would be your answer? What's your "good day?"

If we can come close to Jon's humility, we just might become a good neighbor. And we just might recognize and treat those around with the God-given respect they deserve. On a good day -- kneeling by the road's edge at the side of the hungry, the diseased, the refugee -- God's very own.

³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Chambers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

⁵ Daniel Bessner, op. cit.

The hymn by Lloyd Stone and Georgia Harkness, to the tune Finlandia, says all that needs to be said about being a proud American in this new era, one who wishes to walk humbly with God and neighbor:⁶

“...this is my home, the country where my heart is;
here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine:
but other hearts in other lands are beating
with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.

“My country’s skies are bluer than the ocean,
and sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine;
but other lands have sunlight too, and clover...”

Amen.

⁶“This is My song,” United Methodist Hymnal (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1964).