

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Pentecost July 14 2007 Yr C
Amos 7:7-17, Psalm 82, Colossians 1:1-14, Luke 10:25-37
The Rev. Dr. Seamus P. Doyle.

Lane Denson tells the story she heard about two college students traveling through the South Bronx in an old car in the middle of the night. Suddenly they had a flat and then everything their parents told them about being out at night went through their heads. They should not have been in this particular neighborhood. They had gone to a party and got themselves lost. Before they could open the trunk to see if they even had a spare, an ancient, rusty car squealed to a halt in front of them in the breakdown lane. Out climbed two large men speaking Spanish. The students imagined the worst was going to happen to them. They were frozen in fear. But before they had a chance to decide whether to scream for help or run for their lives, the two Bronx types started changing the tire and were done in minutes.

As they started to leave, the students began to offer them money. The men ignored them, walked away, got into their car, and left. Had the students followed their fear they wouldn't have got the tire changed, and they'd have had to go and get help in the middle of the night.

That's what our inner attitude, that's what xenophobia, our fear of strangers, that's what dismissing people by stereotype, that's what demonizing people and calling them trash does. And as well, that's how our corporate anxiety drives our confusion and dismay over how or even whether to be neighbors across our national boundaries. It often means how those who immigrate here -- legally or illegally -- don't even have a chance for anything, let alone a good deed. What is even worse, it means we may never learn from them either about their selfless giving or any other of the

manifestations of their culture and language if we won't even let them help us out.

The lawyer asked Jesus "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Now being a lawyer meant he was a Scripture Scholar, versed in the Pentateuch, the law of Moses. The contrast here is between a scholar and Jesus who, according to them, was not educated. So, what could a scholar learn from an uneducated person? He probably wanted to be able to tell Jesus, "Your teaching is not consistent with the law of Moses."

Instead of answering the question, Jesus, like a good teacher, put the question back on the student; "How do you understand the scripture?" When the Lawyer replied, *You shall love the lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and your neighbor as yourself*, Jesus came back at him with scripture, *Do this and live*. The Lawyer recognized this statement immediately for it is from the Book of Leviticus. The full statement reads: *If you would attain to eternal life by the keeping of the law, then keep the law. Do it and live. Keep on doing it and live.*

From the Lawyers' point of view this means that, in order for the law to work, all of the law must be kept - one must love their neighbor as themselves. The lawyer now trapped in his own legal system. He also knows the Law applies to everyone. In the Book of Numbers it says, *The community is to have the same rules for you and for the alien living among you; this is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You and the alien shall be the same before the Lord. The same laws and regulations will apply both to you and to the alien living among you.*

The lawyer now looks for a technical loophole asking, *Who is my neighbor?* In response, Jesus tells a story: *A man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho.* In this story we have a few contrasts. The man was going from the mountain to Jericho, which geographically, is the lowest city in the world. The priest and the Levite are what, in today's world, might be a rector and a televangelist. The Samaritan is an outcast, an enemy, a nobody. The man on the road is just a human being in need of help.

When Jesus finished the story he asked the lawyer, *Which of these do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robber's hands?* We can hear the lawyer choking as he tries not to use the word "Samaritan." He simply could not bring himself to say it. He replied, *the one who showed him mercy.* To which Jesus replies *Go and do likewise.*

The point of Jesus' story is to highlight the danger of being dependent on the law. Like Shylock in the Merchant of Venice, we may get our pound of flesh but only if we don't draw blood. Legalism kills. The difference between the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan was that the priest and Levite lived by legalism to the point that they missed the law, they forgot what Jesus was telling the Scripture Scholar; if you are going to live by the law then you have to live by all of it, you can't pick and choose what part of it that suits you.

We still have people who quote the holiness code stating that a man can not lie with another man as with a woman. That same holiness code also states that we should not wear clothes made of two fabrics nor should we plant two different crops in the same field.

The law is good only, as the Scholar knew, if we keep all of the law and the reality is we can't because we are not perfect. What gives us life and gives us eternal life is living our lives with compassion and mercy, with love and forgiveness.

Had the lawyer walked away from Jesus he never would have learned about neighbors, he never would have learned that sometimes our neighbors aren't necessarily our friends, but, nonetheless, in our neighbors we might see the reflection of the face of God and learn how to let our own faces reflect God to someone else. He wouldn't have learned that and, more than likely, neither would we?

It's only when we allow God to let us look through the barriers we erect to separate ourselves that we can see God's examples and then, as Jesus said, get one more chance to, *Go and do likewise*.

Tammy Marclean tells the story on her blog about "A Soul Called Leslie." Tammy begins with a quotation from the letter of St Paul to the Hebrews; *Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!* Then Tammy writes: "This week I was talking to my friend Evette. She doesn't read my blog, but friends from church know her, and I am sure she won't mind me retelling her story. She inspired me. First of all, let me tell you about a soul called Leslie. The first time I saw Leslie, 7-8 years ago, he was standing in the back of my church wearing a tight teal blue dress, 3" red heels, make up, bright red lipstick, his hair was -- and still is -- long, and he was carrying a gold purse. He just stood there just as plain as day looking for a seat. My family sits on the back row and my twins were infants at the time, so I can't

say that my whole attention was on this visitor, but he certainly caught my attention. Several people went up to Leslie and visited with him. I am assuming someone asked him to sit with them. He came back to church while he was in Abilene several times, maybe off and on for several months, but one day he decided it was time to move on. There were several people who tried to reach out a helping hand to Leslie -- food, money and even some men's clothing, although he was not interested in the latter. Leslie found his way to Austin. That is where he lives now. And that is where my story for today really starts. My friend, Evette, told me she was in Austin for a teacher's conference. She knew that Leslie hung out on 6th street, so she went looking for him. She had been one of the people who had befriended Leslie in Abilene.

Evette asked several people if they knew where Leslie could be found. One woman said to her, "Why would you want to find him?" Evette said as plain as day, and very convicted, "He is my friend." She eventually found Leslie and visited with him on the street. She asked him if he remembered her, and he said, "Yes, you are Evette, from Abilene." Leslie works the streets. He is addicted and looks gaunt and thin. The clothes he was wearing were women's under garments and he was on the street. People that walked by knew the person he was -- his character, his life -- but my friend, Evette, talked with him as though he was a long lost friend and she was proud to know him. I told Evette, "God bless you. I am not sure that I would have sought out Leslie." Later on, upon further reflection, I realized I would never have sought out Leslie. If I would have seen Leslie in his street attire, I probably would have avoided him -- put my eyes down and never looked up.

This is a sad and sorry confession, but I would have let my fear of the unknown keep me from loving and engaging the soul called Leslie.

God loves Leslie, and so must we. There will be Leslie's in all of our lives--people that make us uncomfortable, people that don't fit our mold, people that are obnoxious and arrogant, people that hurt our feelings -- but those are our Leslie's. God loves us in our worst moments, how can we withhold that love from others?"

Tammy ends her blog with this prayer: "God forgive me! Help me see your children with your eyes. Help me love with your compassion. Help my heart break for those whom you love that are lost, even when it gets messy. God bless Evette. May she continue to love with your love and inspire me -- and others -- to get out of our comfort zones and love those we don't understand."