

TROUBADOUR

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"And Who Is My Neighbor?"

by Emmett Jarrett, TSSF

On September 8, 2000, St. Francis House began a series of Friday Night Meetings for Clarification of Thought on the general topic of neighbors and neighborhood. We are inviting various neighbors in New London to join us in these conversations: members of the Hispanic community, college students, local youth, civic leaders, business and labor leaders, among others. Fr. Emmett led the first conversation with a reflection on Jesus' teaching about neighbors to establish a theological context. The following is a summary of his talk.

LAST TUESDAY THERE WAS A RALLY in front of New London's City Hall to support efforts to "move ahead with redevelopment" of the city's downtown. A young man was holding a sign which read: "IF NOT NOW, WHEN?" I introduced myself, and asked if he knew where the phrase came from. When he didn't, I told him it was part of Rabbi Hillel's famous first century saying about self-reliance and community. The complete saying is:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
If I am for myself alone, what am I?
If not now, when?

Hillel's advice is highly appropriate for the contentious debates presently taking place over development in New London. The saying expresses the ancient teacher's ability to see and bring out the best in people, to encourage others to compassionate and generous action. It is not true that enlightened self-interest and compassion for others are necessarily opposed. In the heat of debate they often become polarized along with the people arguing the issues. My experience at the rally, as well as at the City Council session which followed, led me to think again about Hillel's teaching which fits neatly with Jesus' teaching in the story of the Good Samaritan and elsewhere about who our neighbors are.

Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) in response to a question from a lawyer who is trying to "test" him: "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Ched Myers, in his reflection on Mark's story of the rich man (Mark 10:17-31) helps us understand the curious concept of both questioners about "inheriting" eternal life, or the Kingdom of God. Both men can only understand eternal life in terms of a "status" to be inherited. In their world, land is the basis of wealth, and the rich "inherit" properties while the poor lose their holdings through default on their debts. The privileged can only envision religion as a reproduction of their own socio-economic situation; "eternal life," like property, must be inherited" [Ched Myers, *Who Will Roll Away the Stone*, p. 165].

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Jesus answers the lawyer's question by asking him what he reads in Scripture. He answers with what Christians have come to call the Summary of the Law: Love God without reservation, and love your neighbor as yourself. The first commandment is the *Sh'ma*, the creed of ancient Israel (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) and the second is from the Holiness Code (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus congratulates the lawyer on his insight and encourages him to persevere. But he, "wanting to justify himself," asks Jesus the fateful question: "And who is my neighbor?" He wants to know what the limits are to his duty. The Torah commands him to care for his fellow Israelite and for the resident aliens in the land. But he gets to define who is the beneficiary of his charity. Jesus turns the whole thing upside down. He puts the neighbor at the center of the situation, and not the lawyer, by telling the story of the Good Samaritan.

You remember the story. A certain man went down to Jericho and was set upon by robbers who beat him, stripped him, and left him half dead on the road. A priest and a Levite happened that way, noticed the man, but passed by on the other side of the road. A despised Samaritan, "moved with compassion," gave aid to the man, took him to an inn, and left money for his care until he came back. Jesus asked: which of the three proved neighbor to the man?

The word "neighbor" here translates the Greek word *plesion*, the root of which is the adverb "near." The neighbor, in both Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, is the one who lives nearby *but is neither a blood relative nor a foreigner protected by the Torah*. The Greek Septuagint, translates the Hebrew word *rea*, which means "the other," as "the neighbor," the one who draws near. The neighbor, then, for Jesus, is the "other," any person who draws near to me, even an enemy.

Only Luke tells the story of the Good Samaritan and it is consistent with his emphasis on the inclusion in the Kingdom of God of the poor, women, and Gentiles (foreigners). The Christian community has thought about this story ever since Jesus told it. St. Augustine of Hippo read it as an allegory. The man who fell among robbers is Adam, wounded by Satan in the Fall. The priest and the Levite represent legalistic religion which cannot save him. The

Good Samaritan is Jesus, the inn is the Church, the innkeeper the local bishop or the pope and the two denarii are the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist. It's a wonderful reading but not what Jesus had in mind for the parable, I think. A parable, after all, is not an allegory but a story told to challenge its hearers to change.

The lawyer came at it backward. It is not a matter of determining who the neighbor is, so I can calculate how much I owe him. Rather it is I who am judged by the need of the neighbor. Whoever "comes near" to me is the other who is "near," and hence "neighbor." Whoever I encounter on the road, to Jericho or New London, is the neighbor I am commanded to "love as I love myself." It is easy to love those who are like us, as the priest and the Levite knew. The other who is *not* a friend or relative, whom we fear because we do not know him, is the test case. When the other "draws near" to us on the road, becomes our "neighbor," he is the center of the story and I must love him as myself.

The neighbor does not have to earn or deserve my love. The lawyer will not even name the hated Samaritan but refers to him as "the one who showed him mercy." *Mercy* is the operative term. The lawyer thinks the great man shows mercy to his inferior, as the rich give charity to the poor. But in Jesus' view, none of us is in a position to condescend to a neighbor because all of us need – and receive – God's mercy. There is a radical equality among all who need God's mercy.

Another famous "neighbor" passage in the New Testament—the Sermon on the Mount—puts love of neighbor in the difficult context of loving the enemy. The reason we are to love our enemies is "so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45). We are to "be perfect" as God is perfect, but the perfection of God is revealed in his indiscriminate mercy toward all people, the evil as well as the good. We must be like God, who is like the Good Samaritan, who does not discriminate between relatives and aliens, citizens and foreigners, among races or sexes. God is *profligate* in his mercy, and a good thing, too, for us!



St. Catherine of Sienna once said that "the only thing we can offer to God of value is to give our love to people as unworthy of it as we are of God's love." And the rabbi of Sasov gave away the last money he had in his pocket to a man of ill repute. When his disciples berated him for his action he asked, "Shall I be more finicky than God, who gave it to me?" That's where I think Rabbi Hillel's saying becomes relevant to ethical reflection and civic discourse. When it comes to who will be our neighbors in New London, shall we be more choosy than God? We must be self-reliant, as Hillel taught. We must take care of ourselves and help others learn to do the same, for "if I am not for myself, who will be for me?" But if that is our *only* concern, if self-regard is our exclusive regard, "what are we?"

The last sentence in Hillel's saying is cryptic. "If not now, when?" The young man holding the sign up at the rally wanted the City Council to act on the proposals put forward by the New London Development Corporation for the creation of housing in downtown New London. Now is *always* "the acceptable time." Procrastination is not a virtue but careful consideration is. When we have considered a matter carefully, however, we have not only to balance the budgetary costs, we have to estimate the devastating cost to ourselves when we claim for ourselves superior status to others and sit in judgment on them.

When we realize that the neighbor whom God wants us to love is precisely the "other" whom I must love as myself, even the enemy, then we do not make distinctions. Once I acknowledge my own need for mercy it becomes impossible for me to think of the other who comes near as any less needy than I, any more or less deserving than I. The question for New London, and for other cities around the world, is this: How do we live this out in a practical world of competing interests, different viewpoints, and limited resources? New London neighbor Charles Granville recently wrote a letter to *The Day* about people in state prisons which ended with this reminder: "There but for the grace of God go I." Christians who genuinely know their own need of mercy will be the first to rush to the needy neighbor's aid and show mercy.



NEW RESIDENTS

We said we wanted to "do whatever he tells you," and he (Jesus) has been telling us a lot! No sooner had Anne & Emmett, Nate & Sarah moved into their third floor quarters, with Fr. Armando on the second floor, than we had the opportunity to welcome **Christine Guarnieri Benham** as a resident in the Calvary Hermitage. Chrissy is a theatre artist, a mother of five and a grandmother, and a full-time student. She brings great gifts to the House and makes our vocation to hospitality a reality.

From mid-October to mid-January St. Francis House will welcome **Fr. Julius Bwambale** of Kasese, Uganda, as a resident. Fr. Bwambale will be in the USA on a "Calvary Fellowship," and will share our life and work as well as assist at Calvary Church, Stonington, and learn about mission in the Diocese of Connecticut.

YOUTH VISIT ST. FRANCIS HOUSE

On Sunday, September 24, six youth from the First Congregational Church, Old Lyme, CT, visited St. Francis House. With their adult leaders, Cathy Zahl and Louise Lynch, the youth – Brendan, Courtney, Emily, Hester, Jessica and Justin – got acquainted with the House, made a walking tour of New London, spent an hour clearing the back acre for a meditation garden, and shared Bible study and supper. Louise Lynch prayed at the site of the future meditation garden.

Great and loving God,

We thank you for bringing us here together today, to feel your presence in new places, in city streets, in the waves of the river, in the people around us. May the new garden we make space for today work to bring people and nature together, provide a respite, and nurture the hearts and souls of all who come here. Bless us in this work that we may be part of the worldwide community of workers who join to make the earth a better and more just place for all living things. Amen.



SAVE THE DATES

February 21-24, 2001

21st annual assembly of the
EPISCOPAL URBAN CAUCUS

in New London!

"DEFINING THE CHURCH'S
AGENDA IN THE NEW GLOBAL
CITY"

WISH LIST

Many have asked us for a "wish list" of things needed at St. Francis House. The following items would be gratefully received:

A solidly made wooden lectern for the chapel.

A small (19") television set with VCR built in, for presentations at meetings.

A freezer for the basement (consult about size).

A small office-size refrigerator for the second floor kitchenette.

12 folding chairs for the chapel.



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