

A sermon delivered by the Rev. John Aeschbury at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 3, April 21, 2013.

“Who is Your God?”

Luke 10:25-37

How many of you were glued to your TV's Friday evening to watch the coverage of the manhunt for Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the youngest of the accused Boston Marathon bombers?

On Monday, there was the horrible bombing at the Boston Marathon. This is the kind of thing that many now fear whenever they go out in public. It's not surprising that some people would ask themselves, what's next? Red, White & Boom, an OSU football game, the Ohio State Fair?

We see something on TV and combined the prevalence on cell phones and surveillance cameras, it is as if we were there. Then, we generalize from that experience

By Friday, we seemed to know who the bombers were. They were two brothers from a suburban Boston. Several high school friends posted social media messages saying that they couldn't believe it was them. Dzhokhar's high school wrestling coach talked about what a great kid he was.

In the aftermath of 9/11, it was fairly easy to differentiate “al-Qaeda” from the rest of us. This will be harder because we are very likely to know people who remind us of those two young men who terrorized the Boston Marathon.

To cope with the *fear*, our social and political leaders will propose a whole new round of actions that will be purported to make us “safe.” Those actions will seek to identify “those people”

who are enemies of our way of life. That process of identifying “them” is fraught with danger.

Jesus had a different idea about “us” and “them.” Jews had many rival ethnic and social groups in that time. The Samaritans were one of those groups of people. The 10 tribes of Israel broke away from Judah in the south and formed their own kingdom following the death of Solomon. Later on, they were invaded by the Assyrians and their leaders were taken into exile. Over the generations, they lost their identity as Hebrews, intermarried with other groups and so by the time of Jesus, they were known as “Samaritans.”

Now it is interesting to note that the Israel of Jesus’ time was not “all that” anyway. Over many generations, this tiny nation was overthrown itself by different groups: Assyrians, Babylonians and now the Romans occupied their land. But at least, they could look down on the “Samaritans.” And so, Jesus gets to telling a story.

First, he is asked, “What should I do to inherit eternal life”. Jesus gets the Pharisee to answer, “Love the Lord . . . and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus agrees.

Then the Pharisee asks, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus tells this parable about the Jericho road.

At the end of the parable, Jesus turns back to the Pharisee and says, “Who was the neighbor to the ‘man who fell into the robbers?’ ” The Pharisee answers, “The one who showed him mercy.”

Notice a couple of things. First of all, the Pharisee does not say “the Samaritan,” but says “the one who showed him mercy.” It is as if, the Pharisee could not even say the word, “Samaritan.”

Secondly, Jesus makes the “beaten man” the subject. He asked his audience (which includes us) to put ourselves in the place of the man beaten at the side of the road. It is bad enough that Jesus asks the crowd (and us) to name the Samaritan as “neighbor.” But

he is also asking us to put ourselves in the place of the one who is beaten and broken.

Jesus turns the “us” and “them” world upside down. And I don’t even have a moment to describe how the Leviticus lesson actually pushes us further along this path. That text says that commands the people to “love the alien as yourself.”

As people of faith, this is our choice. Do we embrace the story of fear where we believe that there are all sorts of people out to get us? Do we embrace the commandment to “love our neighbor” (knowing that neighbor is very broadly defined) as ourselves?

In fact, these represent two different stories of God. You cannot serve the god of fear and the God of love at the same time. Who is your God?

The story of fear surfaces in many ways. Franklin County had been sending juveniles to DYS at higher rates than any other urban county in Ohio. According to some statistics, Columbus City Schools were graduating fewer than 50% of their 9th graders within four years. To justify these facts, the lead Juvenile Court judge, Jim Mason, told a story to a group of BREAD leaders six years ago.

The story was about a 13-year-old girl who was skipping out on school because “all she wanted to do was to be a stripper like her mother.” He told us that story to say that there was nothing you could do about these kids so we might as well lock them up.

Well, the Justice Ministry at First Church along with the Justice Ministry at 52 other congregations refused to accept that story. We pushed for a truancy reduction program called Project KEY which has reduced chronic truancy by 55% in targeted schools. We pushed for the Juvenile Court to adopt a proven diversion program called Restorative Justice. Restorative Justice will go into effect this spring and it works by holding offenders accountable, giving victims a voice and restoring relationships. Both of these program were won at our annual Nehemiah Action meeting on the first Monday in May. Who is your God?

Fear motivates the opposition to the proposed Medicaid expansion.

- Some say that Medicaid expansion is a *government takeover* of health care; apparently, it is better for working poor families to have no healthcare than government provided healthcare;
- Others say that we can't afford it because of the national debt. If you could refuse the Medicaid expansion in Ohio and instead use it toward paying off the national debt (which can't be done), it would result in a reduction of the national debt equal to 7/10,000^{ths} of one percent of the debt.

The First Church Justice Ministry along with the Justice Ministries say “no” to statements about health care. Instead we will call on three state senators from Franklin County to say “yes” to Medicaid expansion and embrace the love of neighbor on Monday, May 6 at the Celeste Center for BREAD's Nehemiah Action. Who is your God?

Finally, fear justifies the harassment of residents who are African-American, African, Latino and Arab. Countless numbers of people are pulled over randomly for minor traffic violations. And many of violations are typically thrown out or dismissed by the judge. I am not saying that all police do this. When the city of Dayton made an effort to look in harassment, they found that the harassment was being done by **three** police officers. They were able to focus their attention on those three and make a significant difference. To date, the Columbus Safety Department has made it very difficult to even discuss the problem. So the Justice Ministry at First Church will gather with 52 other Justice Ministries from throughout Columbus on Monday, May 6 at the Celeste Center to seek revisions to police training, a safe way to report allegations and consistent treatment for those who are white, black, brown and other. Who is your God?

Salvation does not come from the god of fear because sooner or later, you will be the one who is singled out. Salvation does come from the God of love because God's definition of neighbor is unlimited. Everyone is included in God's love.

25 years ago Neal Bowers wrote this poem:

Wanting to be helpful,
we all see ourselves as the Samaritan
rather than the priest or his assistant,
and never as the bruised man in the ditch,
stripped and penniless, taken to a room
smelling of figs and tallow,
where he turns painfully in bed
tonguing his chipped tooth,
touching his swollen eye.

After all, who would imagine himself
mugged somewhere between Jerusalem and Jericho
when he could ride in like some minor deity
on a donkey packed with oil and wine,
his fat purse tucked away, credit unlimited.

Better to be the one without cracked ribs
safe on the hard packed road,
pausing long enough to help
some creature with no luck..
a dog, a sheep, a beaten man...
not one of us.

Who is your God? I give thanks for the God of love. Amen.

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