

“How Are You Doing, Neighbor?”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
July 10, 2016

- Colossians 1:1-14 We ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will, with all the wisdom and understanding that his Spirit gives. ¹⁰ Then you will be able to live as the Lord wants and will always do what pleases him. Your lives will produce all kinds of good deeds, and you will grow in your knowledge of God. (9b-10)
- Luke 10:25-37 ²⁷ The man answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind’; and ‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself.’” ²⁸ “You are right,” Jesus replied; “do this and you will live.” ²⁹ But the teacher of the Law wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?”
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: In affirming the commandments to love God and love neighbor, Jesus challenges us to consider if those in the greatest need would say we are doing enough.

The next time you visit the airport in Singapore I hope you’ll confirm this for me. I read recently that as you exit the restrooms in the Singapore airport you’ll find a touchscreen mounted on the walls. The touchscreen displays a single instruction:

“Please rate our toilet.” Below the instruction, and next to a picture of the employee on duty (whose job it is to keep the restrooms clean, and whose job, evidently, is on the line, depending on customer reviews), are five smiley-face buttons labeled excellent, good, average, poor, and very poor... [plus the message] “This screen is sanitized regularly.”¹

Wow... a restroom survey! There’s something new and different. After all, we’re familiar with questionnaires asking about service and quality and price.

- We’re accustomed to having a server at the restaurant point to a note on the receipt promising a free appetizer on our next visit if we’ll go to their website and review our dining experience.
- A stop at department store or hardware store will result in the cashier circling a QR code printed on the receipt which promises a chance to win a sizeable gift card if you’ll give feedback on your visit.
- As part of an Indians season-ticketholder group I get emails after I’ve attended a game asking me to complete a satisfaction survey – questions like, *Did I have any food or drink? How was the food? How was the service? What did I think of the scoreboard entertainment between innings?*
- And we all know that nowadays it’s pretty common to receive satisfaction surveys after you’ve visited the doctor.
- [By the way, while I was writing this sermon I took an automated call to the church asking if our new phone books had been delivered... and the end of the call the automated voice invited me call a number to rate their automated call to me!]

What if we were to give ourselves a satisfaction survey about our church? Let’s do that. Grab a pencil or pen and turn to the cover of this morning’s bulletin. Let’s evaluate ourselves.

On the line following the number 1 write “Friendliness.” Now circle the smiley-face that you think most accurately reflects our church’s friendliness to visitors: are we Excellent, Good, Average, Poor... or Very Poor.

On the line after Number 2 write “Worship.” How relevant, engaging, meaningful and inspiring does worship tend to be here? Circle the smiley-face that captures your level of satisfaction with worship – does your worship experience tend to be Excellent? Good? Average? Poor? Very Poor?

¹ From “Rate My Service,” *Homiletics*, Vol. 28, No. 4, July-August 2016, 24.

After Number 3 write “Difference.” To what degree does our church make a difference in people’s lives, make a difference in the world? Do we do an Excellent job? Good? Average? Poor? Very Poor?

(I should note that your feedback is always welcomed, whether it’s an affirmation of what we’re doing or you have constructive criticism to share. Our Worship Committee considers all feedback it receives about the content and setting of our services. For that matter, any feedback we receive is shared with the appropriate group, whether it needs to be heard by our deacons, the Session, our office staff, anyone.)

But back to this morning’s survey. My hunch is that most of us tend to give ourselves pretty good marks. This kind of survey is sort of like looking in the mirror. We say to ourselves, “We’re good folks. We’re a friendly lot. We’re open to anybody. Certainly we’re doing the best we can to honor God by trying to be like Jesus. We’re at least Average if not Good; modesty might prevent us from rating ourselves ‘Excellent.’”

But wait a moment. After all, how *we* rate our effectiveness in following Jesus is really of little importance. What *really* matters is what *others* say – or even what others *believe* – about how well or poorly we embody the teachings of Jesus in our day-to-day dealings with the world.

So let’s move on. I’m going to go pretty quickly here. After Number 4 write “Public.” How do you think the general public in Rocky River – or in the community you live in – would rate Rocky River Presbyterian Church for having a positive impact on the community?

Or for Number 5 which you can label “Margins,” how would our church’s influence and impact be rated by people who are often pushed to the margins, the edges of society? Now, so you can picture these folks who so often are invisible to us, let me give you a few examples:

- Picture the guy at the West 25th Street exit ramp holding a sign asking for food – how would he rate his satisfaction with our church?
- Or the hundreds of homeless men who feel themselves fortunate to be able to sleep dormitory style every night at the men’s shelter at 2100 Lakeside? How would they rate their satisfaction with our effort to love neighbors as we love ourselves?
- How about the dozens of women and men who are released from prison each week and who struggle to re-establish themselves as respectable, contributing members of society? How satisfied would they be with what our church is doing to help them redeem their lives?
- How would our acceptance be rated by people who look to the LGBT Community Center of Greater Cleveland for support and advocacy?

Again, this is Number 5 that you can use to rate how satisfied marginalized persons in our communities would be with our stated goal of loving God with all we’ve got and loving neighbors the way we love ourselves. What mark would they give us?

Finally, after Number 6 simply write the word “Peeps.” “What results would we expect if we handed out satisfaction surveys to our ‘peeps,’ that is, to those closest to us? How would our children, spouse, coworkers and next-door neighbors rate the quality of service and love they receive from us?”²

Okay, let’s shift gears here. The survey was simply a little exercise; you don’t have to turn it in – though again, if you ever do have feedback to share, it’s always welcome.

In a way, today’s gospel reading describes a self-administered satisfaction survey. Luke’s presentation of Jesus telling the “Good Samaritan” story is one of the most familiar stories in the Bible. The example of the Good Samaritan has inspired many states to enact laws offering legal protection for individuals who try to help a victim in distress – “Good Samaritan laws.” But Jesus told this beloved story in this instance to prompt his listener to give himself a satisfaction survey – a survey about how well or poorly he himself was living up to what God wanted of him.

Remember, it was a religious law scholar who approached Jesus, and he did it not out of a sincere desire to learn but to try to trap Jesus into saying something foolish or even heretical. This religion lawyer began by tossing him a softball: “What’s my obligation in order to be eternally blessed?” Jesus knew that the lawyer knew the answer and said, “You tell me – what must you do?” The lawyer recited the ancient

² From “Rate My Service,” *Homiletics*, Vol. 28, No. 4, July-August 2016, 26.

texts that instructed believers to love God with your entire being – heart, soul, strength, mind – and, love your neighbor as you love yourself. Jesus nodded.

But then the religion lawyer tried to trap Jesus: “But ‘love your neighbor,’ rabbi...? What constitutes a neighbor? How is that defined? Who does that include?”

Jesus didn’t answer the question. Instead he told a story of a man who was mugged while traveling between Jerusalem and Jericho. The victim’s fellow countrymen didn’t stop to help – not even a priest and a temple-worker – two fellows whose livelihoods supposedly kept their focus on God. No, it was an out-of-towner who stopped. Not just an out-of-towner, but one from Samaria, a region that most Israelites despised – and the feeling was mutual: Jews and Samaritans... Cavaliers and Golden State... Cleveland and Pittsburgh... Columbus and Ann Arbor... you get the picture.

And yet who was it who came to the aid of this robbed and beaten Jew than a fellow traveler hailing from (of all places!) Samaria! We know the rest of the story:

- he bathed the man’s wounds with his oil and wine, then took one of his t-shirts, tore it into strips and bandaged the bleeding wounds – an outlay the Samaritan had not expected to make;
- he walked, having hoisted the injured man onto his own donkey – an unexpected inconvenience;
- he took the man to an inn to rest and heal – an unexpected detour;
- he spent the night treating the man – an unexpected delay;
- he gave the innkeeper money to continue the care – an unexpected expense;
- and he promised to pay for whatever ended up costing more than that – an unexpected commitment.³

Once Jesus had finished the story – a story which is both disturbing and heart-warming – Jesus asked the religious law scholar the question the scholar had asked him: “Who is a neighbor? Which of the three acted like a neighbor?”

We have to hope that the scholar had a genuine “a-ha!” moment of realization after hearing that story. *Which was the neighbor?* It wasn’t the one who (to his credit!) knew the scriptures inside-out. It wasn’t the one who (to his credit!) was meticulous in how he observed all the rituals and traditions of his religious community. No, the one who acted as a neighbor to the victim was the one who showed compassion... the one who showed compassion.

In Luke’s telling of the encounter between Jesus and the scholar of religious law, what emerges is that the lawyer was asking the wrong question for the wrong reason. What mattered was not whether the lawyer was doing what he had to do so he could get into heaven. Jesus showed that what mattered was if the lawyer was doing all he could to address unmet needs in the world. Was he allowing God to grace him with sincere compassion in order to *notice* and to *serve* people facing profound, critical needs?

As a church we made decisions from time to time about what mission projects to get involved with, what programs warrant our financial support. There’s always more to be done than we can do. So through prayer and discussion we discern what our compassionate response will be; we discern where God wants us to place our efforts now, recognizing that that can change over time.

Isn’t this true for each of us individually, too? There are always more appeals for our time, our efforts and energy, our financial gifts than we can satisfy. There are so many wonderful, deserving religious and secular organizations locally, nationally and globally (as well as a few unscrupulous outfits to steer clear of!). But for each of us, we are guided by our sense of compassion to decide what we can do, not for whatever good it might bring our way, but for all the good we can do to meet needs in the lives of others. As we heard from Paul’s Letter to the Colossians,

We ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will, with all the wisdom and understanding that his Spirit gives. ¹⁰ Then you will be able to live as the Lord wants and will always do what pleases him. Your lives will produce all kinds of good deeds, and you will grow in your knowledge of God.⁴

³ Adapted from “‘Rate My Service,’ *Homiletics*, Vol. 28, No. 4, July-August 2016, 25.

⁴ Colossians 1:9b-10 Good News Translation

As I said earlier, how *we* rate our effectiveness in following Jesus is really of little importance. What *really* matters is what *others* say – or even what others *believe* – about how well or poorly we embody the teachings of Jesus in our day-to-day dealings with the world. Both individually and as a church we strive make sure that the things we say and do are guided by compassion. When we allow compassion to be our guide, we won't worry about whether we're earning good ratings in the eyes of others.

“Loving God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves...” those words are far, far more than religious platitudes intended to be embroidered into decorative church banners or listed among goals on a church mission statement. They are a watchword, a constant reminder that Jesus calls us to care for those who may be the least assuming and possess great needs, for to us they are like brothers and sisters. To us they are neighbors.

[sermons: se201606710; © 2016 Jon M. Fancher]