Proper 10 year C | The Neighbor Instinct

July 13,2025 | The Rev Barbara Ballenger

When the KKK decided to hold a rally in Ann Arbor Michigan in June of 1996, 18-year old Keisha Thomas, who is black, decided to attend the protest rally being held nearby. In the course of events KKK sympathizer Albert McKeel Jr. made his way among the protesters and was spotted.

“There’s a Klansman in the crowd,” a woman with a megaphone shouted. The man turned to run and was nocked down by the crowd, which began to kick him and pummel him with signs. That’s when Keisha, a high school student and a person of faith, made history.

She threw herself on top of the man and made herself a human shield to protect him. She pleaded with the attackers to stop, and was heard to say “you can’t beat good into people.” Later she would describe the split-second decision as "two angels picking my body up and laying me down."

The iconic photo of the teenager protecting the white supremacist became Life Magazine’s photo of the year in 1996, and it has been seen all over the world in the last 30 years. Keisha appeared on talk shows, and gave media interviews. Not everyone approved.

Some called Keisha a race traitor for what she did, she later reported[1], others said she was a KKK lover. But what she became in that moment, when her enemy went down in a crowd of angry protestors, was a neighbor. The kind that Jesus had in mind when he bantered with the scholar of Mosaic Law that we encountered In today’s Gospel from Luke.

The story of the Good Samaritan that unfolded was in fact an answer to another question: what must I do to have eternal life? What must I do to be righteous in the eyes of God, and share life with the divine in this world and the next?

It was meant to be a trick question. A stumper, put forth by a Torah scholar who wanted to test Jesus on his orthodoxy, and his knowledge of the law. The man misjudged his opponent.

What does the law say? Jesus asked.

The legal expert answered: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Good answer, said Jesus, do this and you will live.

But who is my neighbor? persisted the lawyer, because his test wasn’t over.

And Jesus answers with that beloved parable about a man of Israel who is waylaid by robbers and left for dead, and who is passed up by righteous people following the letter of the law, and who is only

[1] https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/28koly/iama_keshia_thomas_the_black_teenager_who_saved_a/

helped by a Samaritan, an enemy in the eyes of Israel, someone who does not interpret the law of Moses as Israel does.

The lawyer was forced to admit that the one who acted as neighbor, whom the law required him to love as himself, was that Samaritan, who showed mercy, who also happened to be his enemy.

It's a tricky story actually. The definition of neighbor can still be a little slippery in the recall. These days the phrase Good Samaritan is considered someone who does good deeds, like the guy who helps you change a flat on the highway. The lawyer could have said to Jesus: "So the moral of the story is I should love my enemies when they show me mercy, right?"

To which Jesus would have said: No the moral is that if you want to obtain eternal life you must love your neighbor. And in order to do that you must act with compassion and mercy. And if you did that all the time, everyone would look like your neighbor, and you wouldn't have to ask me who your neighbor is."

Keisha Thomas put it this way: "We all have a conscience, and it was my responsibility to do what I felt was right," [2]

In an interview with Reddit users, Thomas described her action instinct. "There was no time to think about it. A lot of time we need to follow our instinct. We don't because we are fearful."[3]

And this I think is at the heart of what Jesus wanted his Torah scholar to understand. Being a neighbor and loving a neighbor must be instinctive, not cautiously weighed against the law. As we heard in our passage from Deuteronomy this morning: "Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

The word is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. Instinct.

And sometimes the instinctive mercy and love will cause you to make your body a human shield to protect your enemy, because he is also your neighbor.

Our neighbors are all around us – they are being rounded up for lack of legal documents in Norristown. They have been devastated by floods in Texas and are mourning unfathomable loss. They are the victims of violence and displacement throughout the world. And our neighbors are also among those causing harm, encouraging prejudice and sponsoring violence.

How do we love all these different sorts of people as we love ourselves? Well if I were without food or shelter, I'd want someone to help me. If I were in unspeakable loss, I'd want someone to comfort me. And if I were harming others, I would my neighbor to tell me to stop – for the sake of my soul.

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[2] https://www.mlive.com/news/ann-arbor/2016/06/saving_man_from_beating_at_kkk.html

[3] https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/28koly/iama_keshia_thomas_the_black_teenager_who_saved_a/

Love your neighbor as yourself. To be a neighbor is to act with mercy. It is also to act with integrity.

The story of the Good Samaritan could end there, with the expert in the law going home a little embarrassed, and everyone looking for a Samaritan to befriend. We don't really know what happened to the lawyer after that. But we do know what happened to Keisha Thomas.

Sometime after the event she was in a coffee shop in Ann Arbor when a gentleman came up and thanked her for what she had done. He was the son of Albert McKeel Jr. , the man she defended and who she never heard from again. She kept up an acquaintance with his son over the years, and he called her 20 years later after his father died in 2019. The man put his 12-year old daughter on the line, and she told Keisha that if she hadn't saved her grandfather that day, she herself might never have been born.

"When I heard that, I thought this was the future and the past of what peace has created," Keisha said. "The real accomplishment of all this to me is to know that his son and daughter don't share the same views. History didn't repeat itself. That's what gives me hope that the world can get better from generation to generation."[4]

And here I think is the world changing part of the call to be neighbor – it changes things. It changes the life that goes on afterwards. I changed Keisha herself.

The story started with a high school student who instinctively dove to protect a man who also happened to despise her. Over the next 30 years she would become an activist for human rights. She would volunteer in New York after 9/11, organize a shelter to help fires victims in California, distribute food for victims of Hurricane Katrina, walked 1,000 miles from Selma, Alabama, to Washington D.C., with the NAACP for voting rights and volunteered at a makeshift hospital in Haiti, [5]and more.

We are again in a time when opposing groups are squaring off, when violence is heating up all around, and when the law is being put through its paces – both the law of the land and the law of God.

We are called to enter the fray – to lift our voices in solidarity with those who are being threatened, to call for peace and justice, to resist evil, to change what we can.

And because we are doing this as followers of Jesus, we are called to regard everyone as neighbor no matter where they stand or where they fall, to show mercy, to react with love and compassion. Keisha Thomas is a great example of how this is done, steadily, readily, over a lifetime.

She shows us what it takes to follow the instinctive drive to be neighbor, to remind us that God's "word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." Amen.

[4] https://www.mlive.com/news/ann-arbor/2016/06/saving_man_from_beating_at_kkk.html
[5] https://www.mlive.com/news/ann-arbor/2016/06/saving_man_from_beating_at_kkk.html