

Today's sermon continues our focus on our Grace Covenant, reflecting on our pledge to be "an ecumenical church, joining hands with other people of faith and all people of good will to bring healing among God's children."

I confess; I stole my title from the founder of Habitat for Humanity. Millard Fuller was a banker before meeting Clarence Jordan at Koinonia Farm, and his little book *The Theology of the Hammer* hardly qualifies as a "theology" compared to the tomes of the great theologians. When asked if he had been to seminary, Fuller had a quick answer (p. 4) : "I packed pecans and milked an old cow with Clarence Jordan. . . . He taught me obedience to Christ and authentic participation in God's work in the world."

A classmate, friend, and colleague of two other theological pacesetters of the past century, Carlyle Marney and Henlee Barnett, Clarence Jordan was a doctoral graduate of Southern Seminary in Louisville, a bonafide New Testament scholar. Jordan was convinced that the gospel of Christ calls us to join hands across walls of segregation to build a world of peace and justice. He believed that good theology leads to good work and chose to begin with a piece of dirt in southern Georgia, Koinonia Farm, where people would form community (*koinonia*) based on commitment to Christ where nothing else—race, age, appearance, education, class—mattered.

The story is well-worn. Fuller, a wealthy banker, came to the farm in search of personal peace and a purpose in life. Like the story of Jesus and the rich ruler, Jordan suggested that Fuller give his wealth to the poor. Unlike the story in the Gospels, Fuller said yes. In the process of giving away his money, however, he had an idea: low income families could afford to own houses if they were constructed by volunteers and purchased through interest-free loans. The rest is history.

In church history the 20<sup>th</sup> century may be remembered as the ecumenical age. It began with cooperative missions on foreign fields, the formation of the World Council of Churches, then Vatican Council II, and numerous cooperative agreements and church mergers. However, I suspect, at the ground level, that the work of Habitat for Humanity has done more to break down theological walls of separation than any of the great institutional reforms led by ecclesiastics. Habitat ignores ideological and human differences in order to do the work of ministry, to join hands in giving low-income families a hand-up. Habitat is bottom-up rather than top-down.

**Define your neighborhood.** The immediate response in our world is to count the folks you know and meet daily on the street where you live. Jesus had a larger vision of the neighborhood. The theology of the hammer reminds me of the parable of Jesus in Luke that we have come to know as "the good Samaritan." The New Testament contains eight references to the "golden rule" found in Leviticus 19:18: "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus does not invent this command. As a good Jew, he affirms loving the neighbor as self; and in Luke's story he affirms the lawyer's statement of the rule. But the issue was not settled at that point. The question behind the question was, "who is my neighbor?"

Even today, Old Testament scholars do not agree as to the identity of *neighbor* in the Hebrew scriptures. Some believe that neighbor was limited to Jews outside one's family. Others think that it could have included aliens in the land. Both positions are probably correct at different times and various passages in the Old Testament. The question leading to the parable was an attempt to set some boundaries on our obligation in life to love neighbor as self. Regardless of the common understanding, Jesus has a clear answer. The Christian neighborhood bypasses all of the boundaries that we use to distinguish and discriminate in the human world. The principle is found in Deuteronomy as well as our parable. The neighborhood is measured by two considerations—need and compassion—nothing else. The golden rule in Leviticus 19:18 is punctuated with "I am the LORD." Considering the fact that theology undergirds everything in Jewish thought, the parable is radical.

**What about the faith-based neighborhood?** In the parable, the man who fell among thieves is assumed to be a part of the Jewish neighborhood; otherwise Jesus would have identified a Roman soldier, a Gentile, or a despised Samaritan. The first two people to discover his plight could have been farmers, shepherds, artisans, or perhaps like Jesus—carpenters. They were not what we would call "laity." The priest and Levite were religious professionals whose lives revolved around knowing and understanding the Law of God. If anyone should have understood the golden rule, these were the ones. A priest and a Levite should have an informed opinion for the ultimate question, "who is my neighbor?" The only other qualified expert in the Law here is the lawyer with whom Jesus is speaking.

Jesus offers no rationale or explanation, just a description, "he passed by on the other side." Interpreters have gone to great lengths to explain the behavior of these religious professionals toward a fellow Jew, unquestionably a neighbor, lying beside the road dying. They were too busy with tending to the religious

institution to take time to help a suffering neighbor. They were afraid of being contaminated by anyone who was bleeding, dying, or even worse, dead, regardless of who he was. They had to think of the greatest good for the greatest number; they were en route to a greater ministry for a greater number of people. One might even think that their focus was on words, not deeds, but Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad observes that the Prophets made no distinction between word and deed, that Jewish compassion was rooted in God's compassion toward them. For Jews, theology was never just a matter of assembling words; theology was rooted in behavior.

The shocker in the parable is that a Samaritan is the care-giver. Craddock summarizes: "Remember that this man who delayed his own journey, expended great energy, risked danger to himself, spent two days' wages with the assurance of more, and promised to follow up on his activity was ceremonially unclean, socially an outcast, and religiously a heretic." (*Interpretation: Luke*, p. 151.) He was not a part of the accepted faith-based community that defined the neighborhood. A news reporter interviewed W.A. Criswell with embarrassing questions about the absence of the poor and ethnic minorities from his congregation. He responded, "You know, 'birds of a feather. . .'" That is a descriptive reasoning true in the way we are prone to behave, but dead wrong about the nature of the gospel.

The Greek word for ecumenical, *oikoumene*, is "house-world," the inhabited world. It suggests that the entire inhabited world is like a family living under one roof. Ben Franklin is credited with the maxim: "We must all hang together, or assuredly, we shall all hang separately." We are regularly reminded that we share limited space on a troubled planet. For purely pragmatic reasons, we need to build bridges to our neighbors to face the common enemies of humankind with solidarity. The Islamic proverb, "my enemy's enemy is my friend," certainly speaks to the formation of partnerships in economic and ideological warfare as well as the battlefield. I don't think that Jesus was giving a moment of thought to these principles of self defense. The problem with a purely faith-based neighborhood is that we fail to recognize our bond of responsibility through compassion for one another. The ecumenical movement has been a wonderful revolution in the relationship of the church and the world. For Christians to lay aside their theological differences long enough to work together on common concerns has been a wonderful step forward that has foundations in the teaching of Jesus.

***The neighborhood is where compassion meets need.*** In our covenant we have vowed to be an ecumenical church. Technically and traditionally that means joining with other Christian bodies in a common Christian mission. We are involved with ecumenical national bodies like ICCC and the Alliance of Baptists, who share membership in the National Council of Churches. We contribute to causes in Church World Service that pay no attention to the creed, race, or religion of people in need. We are a Christian church involved with other Christians, but we took our mission a step further. We are willing to work "with other people of faith and all people of good will to bring healing among God's children." We are not saying that our faith does not matter, or that it makes no difference what you believe. We are saying that the focus of the gospel is on the need of the world, and the pain of God's children takes precedence.

Growing up in an industrial community in Houston, I learned to work with my hands. My father valued work, he took pride in a job well-done, and he could not imagine raising a lazy son. I learned from Dad to work with my hands. We built additions to our house, did electrical wiring, and even rebuilt two automobile engines in my youth, but we had our differences. During my smart teen years, I learned to express my independence, and Dad had difficulty understanding the monster that I had become. I got interested in books and words, tools that he did not understand. When we tried to talk, we argued. When we put our hands to work on a common project, we enjoyed each other's company. Dad mellowed with the years and gradually came to respect his sons who left the smokestacks of Houston to live in a world of words and books. But I also experienced a conversion. I learned to appreciate the world of labor in which I was nourished. I came to realize that working our mouths on the gospel is never enough. If we do not put our hands to the plow, we will never grow a bean, and worse, we will never build the world God intended.

God's children were intended to come together in a common mission where human compassion meets human need. Beyond the ecumenical movement there is a theology of the hammer.