

## “Your Neighbor as Yourself”

Matthew 22:34-46; Luke 10:25-37

July 15, 2001

James R. Gorman

---

Irmgaard Weth is a pastor in the Evangelische Kirche Des Union (Evangelical Church of the Union) in Germany and a worker in one of its centers for troubled youth. I was at a meeting some years ago with 12 pastors and theologians from Germany and about 15 of the same from Wisconsin and Minnesota. Irmgaard was there among the Germans, and she told a moving story about a little girl who came into her institution in Wuppertal. The church-related institution Irmgaard runs has an enormous array of troubled youth, but the story she told us was itself deeply troubling.

The girl was fourteen when she arrived at the institution that Irmgaard administers and the little girl had been sold into prostitution at age seven. For seven years she lived in a world of prostitution, without parents and without love. She was violated in ways that we cannot even begin to imagine—at least those of us who have lived comparatively unabused lives. The pain that she will carry into adulthood is certainly beyond my imagining.

When it became clear that this was a religious institution and she became more and more comfortable there, this little girl asked this question: “Can I be born again?”

It sort of gives a new twist on the question, doesn't it? It is not any longer a question about faith or salvation in the traditional sense of that term. The question this little girl was asking had a terrifying literalness about it. “Can I start my life over again?” “Can I recapture my lost innocence?” “Can I ever learn to trust anyone ever again?” “Can I be born again?” “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

This little girl had every reason to not believe in God or to not believe in God's power to accomplish very much. She had the right to wallow in her misery. Even more, then, does her question tear at the heart and sear the soul.

The context for Irmgaard's story about this little girl was the question, “Who is my neighbor?” And more deeply, “Whose questions will shape the faith of the Church for years to come?” Who are the ones to whom we will listen as we seek to articulate a faith for the 21 century? Whom will we love enough to listen to the most disturbing questions of life?

Who is my neighbor? Whom shall I love? It is those who are most deeply troubled and whose lives are made so deeply complex by abuse that we try to avoid most assiduously.

When I heard that question from this little girl I immediately thought of myself as that child's pastor and how in God's good name could I even begin to answer it? Can I be born again? Can I, at age 14, ever be innocent again? Can I ever look at a boy with affection? Can I ever experience adolescence in the way other children seem to do? Is it possible for me to ever start my life over?

And the more difficult question is, can I love that little girl enough to even think of her as a little girl in the first instance and as a person who is lovable in the second?

We don't have all that much difficulty loving God and thus fulfilling the first part of the great dual commandment. It is this second part that is always the most difficult. Loving one's neighbor as oneself is one of the most challenging aspects of the Christian life. There is a whole host of humanity out there that most of us try our best to avoid.

There is a story told by Ginny Thornburgh about the transformation which love wrought in her life and the life of her stepson Peter. When she married Dick Thornburgh, who was to become Governor of Pennsylvania and later Attorney General, Ginny also adopted Dick's three sons, the youngest of whom had sustained serious brain damage in the same automobile accident that had killed his mother. Peter was already four by that time, but Ginny was young and enthusiastic, and through several years of struggle and nurture, including the struggle to have Peter fully welcomed and included into the Sunday School program at their church, it finally came to the point where Peter was ready to enter the public schools. As Ginny tells it:

*When at age eight Peter was ready to enter school, I made an appointment with our district elementary school to learn about their program for handicapped children. On a dark, rainy day I checked in at the office of the old brick building and asked where I might find Peter's class.*

*"In the basement," came the reply.*

*I went down a flight of stairs and through a maze of hallways to the building's furnace room. Barely concealed by a makeshift wooden screen, the furnace spewed soot in the dark, musty air. The only daylight came from four small windows near the ceiling. Seepage from rain ran down the walls. Seated at two tables was a group of children, aged six to twelve, making pot holders. Pot holders!*

*By the time I returned upstairs to meet with the school principal, I was trembling with rage. "This can't—this doesn't seem to be a very good place for children," I*

*stammered. “The furnace, the soot, the dampness, the lack of sunlight, the pot holders...”*

*“Oh,” he replied coolly, “They don’t care.”*

That icy reply transformed Ginny’s anger into a passionate desire to change the circumstances, not only for Peter, but for others like him. Joining with others, she set out to discover what conditions were like in other public institutions throughout Pennsylvania.

At one location they discovered residents, whom the authorities deemed unmanageable, being kept in cages. One adolescent boy was cramped into a metal box so small he couldn’t stretch his legs. The investigation that followed that particular discovery led to the firing of the institution’s superintendent, and state funding for the improvement of such facilities.

When Dick Thornburgh was appointed Attorney General, Ginny continued her advocacy work as director of the Religion and Disability program of the National Organization on Disability. The culmination of this work came in July, 1990, when President George Bush the elder signed into law the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Peter is now living a much more independent life, living with friends in a supervised apartment, riding city buses, attending church. Ginny concludes,

*“Because of Peter I learned how to fight for what I believe. I learned how to speak out and stand up to injustice. While trying to nurture his gifts, I discovered my own gifts for communication and organization. Peter changed my life. And for that I’ll be forever thankful.”* (As adapted from Guidposts, October 1993, p2ff.)

Anyone who has had a developmentally disabled child knows far better than I the frustrations of a world in which the disabled are not considered our neighbors. The version of this story from the Gospel of Luke asks us some important questions:

What does it mean to change the way you SEE? DO? ACT? When you look at life with Jesus’ all encompassing commandment to love God, self, and others as your foundation, how does it change your decisions? How can this make your understanding of life different than it was previously?

It is not enough to love God anymore, is it? Jesus calls us to a closer look at the laws and commandments by quoting from the book of Leviticus the phrase about loving one’s neighbor as one’s self.

The pharisees ask a followup question: “Who is my neighbor?” And Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. That parable is especially irritating for the people of that time, because Samaritans were not folks that fine, upstanding citizens should be relating to.

It turns out, dear friends, that the ones we have difficulty calling our neighbors are the ones who are most able and willing to help us ask the fundamental questions about faith. “Can I be born again?” (as the Gospel of Matthew has it) or “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (as it is here in Luke’s telling of the story)

“Yes, you can,” is the answer to the question in Matthew. But we have to talk together a good bit about what that may mean for both you and me. For in having asked the question, you have absolutely transformed my life. The business of loving others is the true business of loving ourselves. The love of our neighbor is, in this odd, God-connected way, the most self-interested thing we can do. The love of others is the most complete fulfillment of the devices and desires of our own heart. And such love is only possible through the grace of God. We cannot do this ourselves. In this odd, God-connected way, our involvement in the hopes and fears of others is the only real way in which to discover our deepest and truest self.

I don’t think I ever really understood what being born again meant, or the real meaning of “eternal life” until I heard the question articulated by a fourteen-year-old girl who had been a prostitute for seven years. Now that question has meaning for me, and I hope with Irmgaard’s help, it will over time have an increasingly powerful meaning for that little girl.

God willing.