

The problem with "my neighbor"

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See, the problem with using language like "my neighbor" is the unintentional (or sometimes more intentional) demarcation that occurs among people. While the distinction might at first strike some as odd, I think it's worth taking a closer look at the inadvertent effects of talking about who is and who is not "my neighbor."

Jesus made it quite clear in the Gospels that those we might not readily admit to being our neighbors, those for whom a duty to care, protect and love is inherently present by virtue of a relationship we may not realize or chose to recognize, are in fact our neighbors and we have a certain responsibility to view them in a renewed way. He illustrated this most famously in the parable of the good Samaritan, a narrative that turns the *status quo* and popular worldview upside down in an effort to illustrate what the Kingdom of God is truly like.

This is something that was not lost on Francis of Assisi. The more time I spend with his writings, the more I consider the early sources and the later development of his nascent Gospel movement in light of theological reflection, the more I realize that Francis never made it to the who is and who is not my neighbor question. For him, as for Christ, the question is fundamentally absurd.

In God's eyes — and therefore, in the Kingdom — *all people* are already in familial relationship with each other. We are brothers and sisters, bound together as a community and human family, thereby rendering questions about which people over and against other people should be counted as neighbors. Granted, not everybody has a swimmingly pleasant relationship with his or her siblings, but by virtue of their simply being your brother or sister, there is a sense of relationship intrinsically present (even if the relationship is bad or could stand

for some improvement).

Francis was able to move beyond this concern about who is or who is not my neighbor, I don't think he would have even asked the question. He was able to meet with all sorts of people from the lowliest and most marginalized leper to the most noble and powerful leader. His ability to see each person as being already in relationship with him allowed him to approach, without fear, people of all backgrounds.

I think we too might better live the Gospel call to follow Christ if we, like Francis, can begin to see others as intrinsically connected to us as part of the human family, not needing to make distinctions or ask questions about who is or who is not our neighbor. Such questions, it seems to me, are simply ways for us to justify disassociating with this or that person or group of people.

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