

Will you ... love your neighbor as yourself?

This is one of the questions asked of persons baptized and confirmed in the Episcopal Church, and to which we respond, “I will, with God’s help.”

This question reminds me of the story of the Good Samaritan, where the “neighbor” is not the person the mugged and robbed man looked to for help and kindness, but the one to whom he would never look, even the one he might abhor, but nevertheless who stops to render aid and comfort in a time of need. The point of the inquiry is to remind us to extend God’s love to those whom we consider rogues, charlatans, fools, aliens, and enemies – anyone whom we might disdain or abhor because they differ from us in religion, race, gender, economic viewpoints, politics, or any other fence we have erected around ourselves.

When I was shot down over North Vietnam and captured, I remember the enemy who was my neighbor, the man who tied my clothes back together after someone else tore them off. In the years since then, I also remember a friend who turned away from me when I was in the depths of despair and depression. The story of the Good Samaritan and the pointed question of my baptismal vows bid me to see them both as “neighbor” and to extend the love of God within me to them as well.

In the high tension of American society today, we need “God’s help” to see each other as neighbor across political and social lines and to see our differences as elements that enrich us all, not as causes for destruction and division. The American poet, Robert Frost addressed this concern in his poem, “Mending Wall” in 1914. One neighbor believed that “good fences make good neighbors,” but the poem insists that “Something there is that doesn't love a wall, That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it, And spills the upper boulders in the sun; And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.” Perhaps if we stop throwing rocks at one another, we might be able to walk together through the gaps in the wall, repairing our relationships rather than rebuilding our divisions.

Democrats, Republicans, Independents, conservatives, liberals, moderates together make up the tapestry of American society. People with heritage in Europe, Africa, South and Central America, Asia add pattern, color and design to our culture. Each and every one can bring light to the darkness of our lives and healing to our wounds – if our eyes are open to see God’s hand at work in the world around us and in the lives of those to whom we look.