

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

Is it Too Much to Ask?

By

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The cowboy has become an archetypal figure in Americas' collective unconscious. It was originally just the nickname given to 19th century cattle herders working mostly on ranches in Texas, Arizona, Wyoming, and Colorado, but has since come to epitomize the quiet, rugged, fearless idea of heroism rooted deep within our national psyche. Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, and later, John Wayne and Clint Eastwood donned wide-rimmed hats, leather boots, dusty kerchiefs, and polished side arms to portray this archetype in hundreds of films and serials. In most these portrayals, they are grumpy survivalists who prefer to be left alone but inevitably ride into town, get drawn into a fight that isn't their own, right the wrong in an epic gunfight, then slowly ride off into the sunset. "Shane! Come back!"

Obviously, I grew up watching those old films and serials and must admit that John Wayne and Clint Eastwood were my first introduction to what it means to be a man in our culture, at least during my formative years. Hopefully I've mostly outgrown this stereotype, even though I still love a good western, and just this morning drank a blend of coffee called *Cowboy Mud*. Even so, I know the cowboy way is far from the best way to be with others and to settle disputes. Their antisocial behavior, their tendency toward violence, and their moral inflexibility could mean serious trouble for anyone who gets in their way. The term, "cowboy justice," after all, means ignoring due process and breaking the law to do whatever one believes is right. The cowboy is the law and often the only reason they're any better than the bad guys they're fighting is because they're just a little quicker on the draw.

They certainly have been glorified, but, historically, cowboys were just ranch hands trying to make a living herding cattle. That living became threatened when, in the 1870's, about the time our church was founded, sheepherding entered the market. The cows and sheep initially competed to graze on the same public lands, which didn't make the cowboys happy. This eventually led to the, so called, Sheep Wars, which lasted 50 years, between 1870 and 1920, during which there were more than a hundred armed conflicts, dozens of human deaths, and the pointless slaughter of more than a hundred-thousand sheep. Given that today we have cowboys and not sheepboys, I guess we all know who won the war.

And here's the point I want to make with all of this, that one of the main differences between the cowboys and the sheepboys, was that the latter believed in open and free grazing on public land, whereas the cowboys marked territory and built fences to keep the sheepboys out. Given that the sheepherders were most often Mexican and Native American, these fences were also a form of institutional racism—built in structures meant to keep minorities from having equal access to shared resources. This strategy of cutting the once open range off to

outsiders and newcomers was so pervasive that it led to what historians call the Fence Cutting wars in the 1880s, as well as to a kind of Western mafia in which cattle kings or cattle barons created huge syndicates under the Homestead Act of 1862, allowing them to take control of large tracts of public lands as if they owned them, preventing smaller operations from succeeding or, in many cases, from even getting started.

To the victor goes the spoils, and today, because of all this, we still have larger than life aggrandized cowboys and no sheepboys. We have institutional racism that continues to maintain boundaries and borders to protect the wealth and power of those in charge. We have a society that, by and large, still prefers to handle disputes with guns and violence. We have a territorial country that's still building fences to keep others out. We still have a lot of cowboy justice being enforced by those who are supposed to uphold the law, including some of the highest lawmakers in the land who blatantly ignore any rules that don't serve their personal interests, including, now, their personal conflicts of interest. We have a society that still believes it has every right to choose who its neighbors will be; who is on our side of the fence and who gets left out; who will live in our neighborhoods, and go to our schools, and work in our jobs, and get to drive down our streets.

I don't mean to put down cowboys. Like Willie Nelson sings, "My heroes have always been cowboys, and they still are it seems." I'm just using this little tidbit from history to make a point about the society we live in today, that it'd be more accurate to call ours a Cowboy nation than a Christian nation, because we're far better at building fences between our neighbors than loving them as ourselves.

Yet when Jesus instructed his followers, "Love your neighbor as yourself," I'm pretty sure he didn't mean just your white neighbors, or your American neighbors, or your straight neighbors, or your Christian neighbors, or your conservative neighbors. Jesus, who was often criticized by Fox News... I mean the Pharisees... for associating with those his society ostracized, those who had been demonized, or declared unclean and untouchable, people who did degrading work, or were considered second class citizens, like women, the disabled, the poor, and people of other faiths and ethnicities. He didn't build fences to keep them out. He invited them into his ever-widening circle of acceptance and inclusion.

So, in my humble opinion, if there is any good in the recent election result, it is that Christian fundamentalism is politically dead. At least they can no longer cite their faith to justify voting exclusively for right-wing politicians. During the campaign, Donald Trump unceasingly violated their puritanical standards of what it means to be a godly Christian man. Some conservative Christians, like Russell Moore, head of the Southern Baptist Ethics Commission, questioned even calling him a Christian, "despite the fact that he openly boasts and brags about adulterous affairs and uses racially tinged and derogatory speech and a thousand

other things, and says he has nothing for which to ask forgiveness from God.”¹ Nevertheless, according to the Pew Research Center, 78 percent of white evangelicals supported Trump.² So, at the very least, they can no longer brag about taking the moral high ground.

But my problem with those who supported Trump is that it doesn't seem to me they fully considered the welfare of their neighbors before doing so. He has regularly spoken derogatively and misogynistically of women, was one of the first to claim Barak Obama could not legitimately be President of the United States because he's an African, and during the campaign he openly mocked the disabled, spoke of banning Muslims from entering the country, about building a great wall to keep Mexican immigrants out, most of whom he claims are rapists, drug dealers, and criminals, said he will appoint Supreme Court justices who will overturn Marriage Equality, asked what's the point in having nuclear weapons if we're not going to use them, and continues to assert that Global Warming isn't happening and he will bring back the fossil fuel industry. Given his disregard for minorities, his racist overtones, the tremendous enthusiasm white supremacist groups expressed for him, it became clear to many of that that his promise to “make American great again” is really code for making it “white again.”

So, even though, in reality, a large majority of voters, nearly 3 million, voted for his opponent, and he seems to have gotten an unfair boost from both Russian hackers and a last minute false report from the FBI, and the gerrymandering of voting districts to favor the GOP, and stringent voter ID laws making it especially difficult for African Americans to cast their ballots, there were still a significant number of people, a significant number of our neighbors, close to half who voted, who weren't disturbed enough of about all the disparaging remarks and threats he made about others, about women, blacks, and Hispanics, in particular, or about his nonchalant attitude about using nuclear bombs that can wipe out hundreds of thousands with the push of a button, and his pledge to exacerbate the causes of global warming, the greatest threat to life on Earth we've ever faced, to influence their decision.

Admittedly I cannot know the mind and hearts of everyone who voted for Donald Trump, and don't wish to presume too much or lump them into one category. Yet, despite having an unqualified madman as leader of the Free World, the thing about this tragic turn of events that disturbs me most is that so many people, so many of my neighbors, people I likely encounter every day, weren't troubled enough by all of this to vote against him. My presumption, true or false, politically correct or not to say, is that most felt they had some personal interest in doing so, something to gain for themselves, like the promise of good jobs, which seems like a legitimate desire, but not at the expense of so many others. Like cowboys

¹¹ <http://baptistnews.com/article/evangelical-elite-just-doesnt-get-it-claims-pastor-and-trump-supporter/#.WHq-SoWcHZs>

² <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/07/13/evangelicals-rally-to-trump-religious-nones-back-clinton/>

fencing off land, too many managed to fence out any thought of how a Trump victory will impact their neighbors.

Here's an example of what I mean; You probably recall that a few months ago, Obama's Department of Justice decided to phase out its use of private corporate prisons. Keeping people locked up for profit, after all, creates a tremendous conflict of interest. For if corporations are paid according to how many inmates they detain, and prison workers depend on a high prison count in order to secure their jobs, and local economies come to depend on the prison industry, then there becomes a great demand for inmates, that is, for arresting people and locking them up. After the DOJ's announcement, for example, County Judge Kathryn Wiseman, in Big Spring, Texas, said, "We're very concerned about what's going to happen," because the private prison in her community employs nearly 500 people. "These are our friends and neighbors," she says, "these are people who coach Little League baseball and belong to our civic organization. They will leave a hole not just in our economy because they pay taxes, but in our community."³

Judge Wiseman's concern for her 500 neighbors is admirable, but her understanding of who exactly her neighbors are is too small and narrow. What about the 3500 inmates housed at the Big Spring Correctional Facility? Are they her neighbors? Do they have the quality of life they need in a corporate prison that cuts costs to stay profitable? Do they really belong in prison, or are they there because of their race? Or because they got swept up in the new prison industrial complex that meets supply and demand through a system of mass incarceration? Is it right to have jobs at the expense of so many others and so much else? Are we obligated to consider the welfare of our neighbors, of all our neighbors, those inside and outside the fence, when pursuing our own interests? How big is the corral we put our neighbors in? How vast is the world outside our own private circle?

Here's another example. According to a recent report, the number of Americans who smoke cigarettes has now dropped to less than 15 percent, down from 25 percent just a decade ago.⁴ This decline is largely due to stricter regulations on tobacco and public awareness campaigns about the health hazards associated with smoking. This is great news for Americans, but it hasn't stopped American cigarette companies from going after consumers in foreign countries where, in many cases, smoking is on the rise. This, again, poses the question. Who are our neighbors? Need we concern ourselves only with the health of Americans while continuing to sell and promote this deadly product to those outside our national borders? Are the people in places like Russia, Indonesia, and China, where 50 percent of men and 25 percent of women smoke, our neighbors? Or do we get to make decisions that ignore their interests because we've fenced them out?

³ <http://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/Closure-of-private-prisons-could-hit-Texas-in-9204206.php>

⁴ <http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/17/health/smoking-rate-decline/>

Speaking of China, which is simultaneously the world leader in renewable energy and has some of the worst air pollution on the planet, is it right to let U.S. industry exacerbate the problem by selling them unrefined coal that doesn't meet our own regulatory standards? According to a Harvard report out just this week, the number of coal related deaths due to poor air quality in Southeast Asia is expected to triple with the next 13 years.⁵ Who are our neighbors? Are they just the people on this side of the ocean? Or do we have a moral obligation to love the Chinese as much as we love ourselves? Are they too our brothers and sisters, part of the human family living with us in our global neighborhood? Or are they shepherders living outside the fence who must somehow strive for themselves even though we've cut them off from the best grazing areas?

The renowned Christian theologian and celebrated professor at Union Theological Seminary and Harvard once said, "...*sin is separation*. To be in the state of sin is to be in the state of separation."⁶ This is why the ancient Hebrews had prohibitions against using spotted animals in their religious rituals, because the spots and blotches reminded them of the time they had been separated, enslaved, oppressed, and excluded. "Do not mate two different kinds of cattle," the scripture says, "Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material."⁷ This isn't because spotted cows, or hybrid plants, or synthetic clothes were considered innately evil, only that they should not be used in religious rituals because religion is about wholeness, about repairing what has been torn apart, about reconnecting with those who have been segregated and left out. Religion is about atonement, at-one-ment, about including everyone and become one with all our relations. As the Universalist minister, Olympia Brown once said, "Every nation must learn that the people of all nations are children of God, and must share the wealth of the world"⁸

So when Jesus instructed his followers to "love your neighbor as yourself," I'm quite sure he wasn't referring just to those living on our block, or in our country, or who look like us, and think like us, and act like us. I'm pretty sure he meant we are morally obligated to look out for the interests of others, known and unknown, and to consider how their welfare might be impacted by the decisions we make, by the ballots we cast, by the way we live, by the fences we build.

Who is my neighbor? To answer this question, we must first tear down the walls of separation, and cut the fences we've built to protect our own interests and keep others out. Only then can we understand we are one family living in a global village.

⁵ <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/12/asia/southeast-asia-pollution-coal-report/>

⁶ Tillich, Paul, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, NY, 1951, Chapter 19, "You Are Accepted."

⁷ Leviticus 19:19.

⁸ "Words and Deeds of Prophetic Women and Men" (Living Traditions we Share, Part 2) Rev. L. Mills, Jr. Presented before the UUTC Congregation, October 16, 2005.

I want to close with a brief story about a kid named, Howard Lewis, a polio victim and orphan who had been sent to live at Father Flanagan's Home for Boys, Boys Town, way back in 1918. Because of his heavy braces, little Howard had trouble managing steps of any kind. But before long some of the older boys started carrying him piggy back up and down the stairs, even though his heavy braces made it difficult. One day Father Flanagan asked one of them why they do it. The boy answered, "He ain't heavy, father, he's my brother." That phrase eventually became Boys Town's official slogan.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=usZtSl8mX08>

He ain't heavy, he's my brother. She ain't heavy, she's my sister. Her welfare is my concern. No burden is he. Love your neighbor as yourself. Is it too much to ask?