

Won't You Be My Neighbor?

Toward the end of Act V, Scene II of Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing," Beatrice receives word of some good news to be heard at her uncle's house. She asks her newly-minted boyfriend Benedick to accompany her. In the rather hormone-induced eloquence of Shakespearean lovers the young man replies,

I will live in thy heart, die in thy lap, and be
buried in thy eyes.

Then, after what I always imagine should be an exasperated and lowering look from his inamorata, the stripling quickly adds,

and moreover I will go with
thee to thy uncle's.

See, all that living and dying and burying stuff is well enough, but what the girl needs is a small, practical, and even rather prosaic favor. It does not involve death or even physical ordeal. Indeed, she does not require his support and succor in her hour of grief; just his company as she goes to collect a gobbet of good news about a friend.

Dallas Willard laments that "people are not thought to be philanthropists because they are kind and thoughtful and look out for the good of those around them." Philanthropy, we seem to think, is a fancy word for fancy (and expensive) acts of kindness carried out by fancy (and wealthy) benefactors. By contrast, Willard asserts, "when Jesus speaks of love as the principle of life as it ought to be, he is referring mainly to the posture of benefiting others in the ordinary relations of human life. The heroic occasions will then fit in as they come along, but the reverse is not true."

Someone once asked Yogi Berra what he'd do if he found a million dollars. He replied that he'd search out the owner and "if he was poor, I'd

return it." But if we won't give money we don't own back to the person who does, we'll probably never be very generous by way of giving money we do own to people who don't.

"Who is my neighbor?" a straight-laced and straight-A seminarian once asked Jesus. The Master responds with the original Traveling Salesman Joke, and the punch-line has nothing to do with a farmer's daughter: the next guy you run into who needs something, whether it's a ride on your donkey or a companion on an errand.

When, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee on the Easter-side of the resurrection, Peter finally climbed down from his over-heated rhetoric about going with Jesus to the death, the Lord asked him, "Peter, do you love me?" Upon receiving an affirmative answer, Jesus replied, "Then how 'bout taking care of my folks?" Peter's reply could well be paraphrased in Elizabethan pentameter:

I will live in thy service, die on a cross, and be
buried in thy name;
and, moreover, I will feed thy sheep.

Go thou and do likewise.

Crying Uncle,

Doug