"Neighbor" Is a Verb

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I imagine that my English teachers from high school and college might look askance at the title for this column. Everyone knows that the word neighbor is a noun. Imagine my surprise, then, when I went on line for a definition and found out that it is a noun, a verb, and an adjective!  

The online Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word as follows: “Neigh-bor—Noun: One living or located nearby; Adjective: Being immediately adjoining or relatively nearby; Verb: Transitive verb—To adjoin immediately or lie relatively nearby; Intransitive verb—To live or be located as a neighbor, to associate in a neighborly way.”

But even the online verbal definition of neighbor is not what I have in mind. In the spring semester of 2013, I had the privilege of teaching two courses in which I was able to share with students how to examine biblical narratives using a method called “Narrative Analysis.” This method of carefully cataloging a variety of characteristics of a story allows the researcher to see on a page in tabular form the patterns of story features and properties. It allows us to quantify storytelling method (the storyteller’s genius of putting across the details of the story) and story function (the point being made by the story). One of the things that I like about this method of research in the way we teach it at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary is the way it is compatible with a high view of Scripture. Some methods scholars use tear the Bible apart seeking something behind the text. Narrative Analysis takes the text as a whole and tries to understand it on its own terms. It takes seriously the points the author is seeking to make.

As part of our study, I taught the students how to rapidly study a passage to get the main point. We studied the parable of the Good Samaritan. The setting for this well-known story is a discussion between a lawyer and Jesus found in Luke 10. The lawyer inquired what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus responded with a question of His own: “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” The man repeated the common words of the Law that one must love God supremely and one’s neighbor as oneself. Jesus said that the answer was correct: “Do this and you will live.”
But the man was not satisfied. Luke tells us that he wanted to “justify himself” (Luke 10:29). Twice in his writings Luke uses a variation of this term: “justify himself” (Luke 10:29) and “justify yourselves” (16:15)—and in both cases it is negative. It suggests an approach to the Law of God that sees the high demand of God’s truth but tries to defend a human understanding and standard that blunts the clear, pointed testimony of God’s revelation.

The way the lawyer tried to justify himself was by asking the seemingly innocuous question, “And who is my neighbor?” This prompted Jesus to tell the story of the Good Samaritan. The story tells of a man going down to Jericho who was robbed and left half-dead. Then three other travelers come by: a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. The first two pass the man by. We are not told why, but in the context of the lawyer’s question, it seems only too clear that they did the wrong thing. They probably were concerned about their purity (if the man was dead, they would become impure by touching him) and the danger of staying where thieves lurked.

Then the Samaritan comes by. Everything changes. The story slows down. We are told that when he saw the injured man, he had compassion on him. Next we are shown how that inner feeling showed itself in many actions: He went to him (risking his safety), bound his wounds, using oil to soothe and wine to cleanse (the alcohol content—think of an alcohol wipe). He placed the man on his own beast, took him to an inn, cared for him all night, and then arranged with the innkeeper for his care, even promising to pay any additional bill on his return. All of this richly showed the Samaritan’s compassion. It would be difficult for anyone to miss who the hero of the story is.

But then come the follow-up words of Jesus. He says to the lawyer, “Which of these three, does it seem to you, was a neighbor to the man who fell among thieves?” The lawyer had asked, “Who is my neighbor?” He wanted to identify different individuals, this one as my neighbor, that one as not. This one deserves my love; that one does not. In the parable, the lawyer would have seen his attitude reflected in the actions of the priest and Levite. That injured man did not represent his neighbor. The risks to personal purity and safety would be too high.

That was the problem: a question, “Who is my neighbor?” seemingly pious and righteous, actually covering a selfish spirit that rules people out of the group I have responsibility to help. Jesus’ question changes all that. It can slip by if you read it quickly. But He turned the question around. The lawyer, listening to the story, would have been asking, “And is this beaten man my neighbor?” You could not miss that the Samaritan is the hero, and hence the common name for the story, the Good Samaritan, even though the term good is never applied to him in the story. But Jesus’ question drives things further.

The injured man wasn’t the neighbor—the Samaritan was. That was the point of Jesus’ question. It forced the lawyer to see the story in a different light. From his reluctant lips came the admission that “the one who showed him mercy” was the neighbor. “Neighbor” isn’t someone you identify; it is something you are, something you do toward anyone you meet. Neighbor is a verb, not a noun. You don’t have to ask who your neighbor is, seeking some way to rule someone out of your responsibility to show kindness. Instead, every person you and I meet—every single one—has a neighbor in you and me. All that energy used to determine who my neighbor is can be redirected toward serving them.

Jesus’ final words are active, “You go and do likewise.” The command is still there for us. Be a verb, not a noun.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. My excuse for using an online definition is that I am away from my office for a symposium in Brazil on Christian social action. I would imagine that my students and a younger generation would take it as natural to look up the definition online.


3. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references in this column are quoted from the King James Version of the Bible.

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