

I like the mountain guru cartoons. A young man travels thousands of miles, treks to the top of a rocky mountain, seeking the meaning of life and is shocked to find his mother sitting there. She says, *Why are you so surprised?*

The guru’s response to the seekers’ question is seldom enlightening and sometimes humorous: *Never try to milk a unicorn; Don’t patronize me. Nobody cares what I think anymore. Go ask Dr. Phil; Wherever you go, there you are.*

Actually, the last one is more enlightening than funny. We have come to believe the meaning of life, the secret to happiness, lies somewhere else, usually in a distant place, the more exotic the better. The Beatles went to India; Thomas Merton went to Nepal to meet the Dali Lama; Cheryl Strayed hiked the Pacific Crest Trail from Mexico to Canada, 1100 miles.

Treks in search of answers to life’s persistent questions have a long tradition. The “Epic of Gilgamesh” was composed between three and four thousand years ago. The daring hero, unlike ordinary men, crosses the great sea in an effort to bring back the secret of immortality.

The author of Deuteronomy, some 2500 years ago, declared such treks no longer necessary. *Who will go up to heaven for us, who will cross to the other side of the sea, and get the secret word for us, so that we may hear it and live?* The response: *The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.*

Jesus reiterates the point. When the lawyer wants to know the secret of immortality, Jesus asks *What does the law say?* The lawyer responds, *Love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.* This law is written in the book of Deuteronomy.

Guru Jesus exposes the lawyer’s real problem: it is not a matter of knowing; it is a matter of doing. *Do what you know, and you will live.* The lawyer, out of embarrassment, attempts to vindicate/justify himself: *Who is my neighbor?*

I wonder why he doesn’t ask, *Who is God?* How does he love with all his heart, soul, strength and mind, the God whom he cannot see? Perhaps loving the invisible God is easier than loving the all too visible, cantankerous, grouchy neighbor.

To imagine better, kinder, friendly neighbors in another place is not hard. Have you seen the neighbors? People are now moving to parts of this country where the neighbors look

more like and think more like they do. Geographical therapy is not only expensive, but as Silvio observes in “The Sopranos,” it seldom works.

Eternal life, according to John, is to know God. It is a quality of life, a flourishing life of fulfillment and freedom. We know God not in abstract, philosophical arguments, not in the wishful imaginings of desire, but in the concrete, flesh and blood reality of our neighbors. We cannot know God apart from knowing our neighbor. Therefore we cannot have eternal life apart from relationship with our neighbor.

No wonder the lawyer wants to know, “Who is my neighbor?” He wants secure borders; he wants respected boundaries; he wants love limited by his self-interest.

The poet, Robert Lax, observes, *if you can't get along (pretty well) with your neighbors, you're probably not getting along with yourself. If you seem to be doing fine with your neighbors, but have strong arguments with yourself, the balance isn't right either.*

*Your neighbors, as you perceive them are really to a high degree parts of yourself (aspects of yourself) . . . you project meanings onto them, ascribe values to them that come from within you and which they in their reality are sometimes barely able to sustain.*

With the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus declares all the fences we build to protect ourselves from the neighbors—religious, ethnic, racial, gender, economic—all these fences we build to limit love's embrace, only expose aspects of ourselves we cannot accept.

The secret to the meaning of life is not found in a trek up the Colorado Rockies, nor in a retreat at Oak Creek Canyon (home to “vortexes,” mysterious areas of concentrated energy to which seekers of enlightenment are drawn), nor (unfortunately) at Emerald Isle.

The key to happiness is found in the door to our neighbor's heart. The key is mercy. Blessed (happy) are the merciful, for they shall know mercy. Or, How blissful the merciful, for they shall receive mercy (Hart's translation).