Four years ago this month a student here knocked at my door, sat by my kitchen table, and asked if he could have a conversation with me. You know that these kinds of requests are part of our daily routine, but -- like the lawyer in today's reading -- I was not expecting to hear what I heard. My student asked, "Am I going to hell because I am gay?"

The nature of this question still haunts me because, while we can have differing opinions about homosexuality or any other topic, my distress centered on how stereotypes and misunderstandings can run rampant in our culture and at our School. Do you really think that you are going to hell, or that someone you know might be going to hell, because you are different than what the culture has determined to be the "norm" or to be "right"? Do you think that you are of less value than someone else because you have "different" experiences or come from "different" circumstances?

I have often wondered why the man in today's reading was beaten, almost to death. Was it because he was rich and the robbers wanted money? Or was it because he was a Palestinian or Arab in a Jewish-dominated town? Or because he was a Greek person living in a Roman state? Think about our own society. Why do some people get beaten and left for dead? Because they're black. Malcolm X once said that black people "didn't land on Plymouth Rock," but rather that Plymouth Rock "landed on" them. No wonder that one black British poet named Meiling Jin would talk about being different in lines like these:

One day I learnt
A secret art,
Invisible-ness it was called.
I think it worked. ("Strangers in a Hostile Landscape")

The poet is right: It seems to work best to make yourself INVISIBLE when the world around you is filled with people who make you feel as if you're going to hell or that you might be in grave danger because you're different. All kinds of problems result when people are placed into categories because they're different from us, rather than being thought of as our neighbors. Here are some examples:

Muslims are fundamentalists.
Gays are sinners.
Poor people are poor because they brought it on themselves.
Women make up the weaker sex.
It's strange to have only one living parent in the household.

All this putting of people in categories only adds to the difficult and strange messages that we send to each other. One psychologist, Michael Thompson, worries that our culture and we adults have become very good at giving ONE "script" to you, our students, as if this script offers THE one solution -- THE one way -- about how to live your life. But what happens when you cannot find yourself, your character, and your own experiences in the text of this "script"?
Well, perhaps -- like the poet -- you might try your best to become "invisible." That has certainly happened here at St. Paul's. Imagine what it was like to be one of only a few students who were quietly taken to Roman Catholic Mass in the 1930s, when the majority -- the Episcopalians -- must have wondered what that meant. Or to have been one of few Jewish students here in the middle of the twentieth century, when anti-Semitism was one reaction to the Zionist movement. Or to have been John Walker, the first black member of this faculty, and to know that some esteemed SPS alumni viciously opposed your appointment because of your race. Or to have been one of the first female students here in the 1970s. Or to have been that student I mentioned earlier, in the late 1990s, who had heard from people in his house and from the "script" of his culture that he would certainly go to hell because of his sexual orientation.

No wonder we want to be invisible: WHEN we feel that what others define as "normal" is something that is not you, that is not me;

WHEN the "script" is something that we cannot follow because it is not your script, because is not my script. My friends, today's reading offers a message of grace because it's point is that NO ONE IS INVISIBLE. As a Christian, I believe that none of you is invisible to God. God loves each of you; God loves you for who you are and no matter how your "script" reads. In fact, Jesus challenges us to take a hard look at how we treat our neighbors -- some of whom are very different than us but who deserve to be treated as people who share God's creation.

But like the priest and the Levite in our reading, I often find neighbor-loving to be very hard, especially when these neighbors are so different than me that I wish they were invisible. One Sunday, while walking with all the well-dressed Midtown Episcopalians on the glorious Park Avenue in Manhattan, my goal was that shrine of 11 a.m. liturgy called St. Bartholomew's Church. On the way I was met by a homeless person. I was stopped in my tracks by the sight and smell and sound of poverty. All he wanted was a small meal, a cup of coffee. All I wanted was to get to my destination: the First of Advent hymns, the mass, the sermon. Since I am out of the habit of city living, having been here five years, I no longer possess a well-tuned radar for survival by acting more like the priest and the Levite than the Good Samaritan when I confront poverty in my tracks. My eyes met his, and it was too late. I was trapped. So I spent a mere five minutes and a mere five dollars on him at the nearest McDonalds. As I continued up Park Avenue, I became more and more angry, and felt more and more guilty. How can this man's plight be so INVISIBLE to me, so INVISIBLE to a government that should help take care of him, and -- worst -- so INVISIBLE to God. I found myself screaming in silence, "Can't you, God, see this poverty? Can't you see this person -- beaten, left for dead on the road? Can't you, God, partner with me to fix these problems? Where are you, God, when we need you?"

And then I remembered that Jesus calls ME to take care of my neighbors -- every person, every day, every opportunity.

Look around you. Check out these neighbors of yours in this Chapel. Jesus said, "Who acts as a neighbor to all these DIFFERENT people -- to all these Paulies?" The answer: "The one who shows them mercy."

GO AND DO LIKewise.