

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

“And Who Is My Neighbor?”

Our Redeemer Dallas 2020

A lawyer stood up to put [Jesus] to the test: “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your 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.” And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.” But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:25-29)

You know what he’s trying to do, don’t you?

This lawyer, who originally set out to test Jesus, recognizes that he *himself* is being tested. He has answered Jesus’ question correctly: if he can keep the two greatest commandments in the Law -- love God, love neighbor -- he will inherit eternal life. But knowing the Law and *doing* the Law are two completely different things, and he knows it, which is why it says that he, desiring to justify himself, followed up, saying, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” He may know what is written in the Law, but he also knows that he *has not done it*. Oh, maybe he’s loved those who love *him*, but what about his enemies? What about the tax collectors and sinners? Has he loved them as he loves himself? I imagine not. And that means he has fallen *short* of the Law. He hasn’t measured up to God’s righteous standard, and so his quest to inherit eternal life has failed. Unless...unless he can find a way to make the Law somehow *easier*; to lower the bar *just* enough to put it within reach. Surely, God didn’t mean you have to love *everyone*. That’s impossible! Who loves everyone? And he’s willing to bet Jesus will agree: “Who’s your neighbor? Why, the one who *deserves* your love, of course! Don’t worry about those who disagree with you or whom you just don’t *feel* like loving.” That’s what he’s *hoping* Jesus will say.

Instead, Jesus responds with a parable about what it means to be a neighbor. We call it the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which, if you were among Jesus’ original audience, like this lawyer, would have seemed an absolute contradiction in terms.

There *was* no such thing as a good Samaritan,

at least, not as far as a faithful Jew was concerned. The Samaritans were *bad*, and they always had been. They were once Israelites of the former northern kingdom of Israel. But, if you know your Old Testament history, then you know that they despised the Lord’s covenant, going after false idols, and were exiled in Assyria, where they continued

to sin, one generation after another, until they were no longer considered God's people. In fact, in next week's Gospel lesson from Luke 17, Jesus Himself will refer to a Samaritan as a "foreigner" (verse 18). These were people who were considered *strangers* in the land, unclean. It was even said that "He who eats the bread of a Samaritan is like one that eats the flesh of swine."¹

So, when, in Jesus' parable, it's not the priest or the Levite who stops to help the man who has been stripped and beaten and left half dead by robbers, but a *Samaritan*, that's shocking. Samaritans didn't help anyone. They were the *bad* guys, remember? We just read in today's Old Testament lesson that it was the Samaritans who took 200,000 people captive from the southern kingdom of Judah. What we *didn't* read is how *violent* that confrontation was. Back in verse 5 of 2 Chronicles 28, it says that the people were struck with "great force," that 120,000 of them were killed in one day, and that the king's son, the commander of his palace, and his second-in-command were all executed. This was *beyond* what God had authorized the Samaritans to do. This was cruel and unusual. And He lets them know it, sending His prophet Oded to warn them, saying, "Behold, because the Lord, the God of your fathers, was angry with Judah, he gave them into your hand, but *you have killed them in a rage that has reached up to heaven*" (verse 9). And he instructs them to send the captives back, for "the fierce wrath of the Lord is upon you" (verse 10). And they do, but not without some hard feelings on the part of the Judaites, feelings that lingered all the way down to Jesus' day.

So, if a Samaritan, of all people, can stop to help someone in his physical need, then then lawyer has his answer:

Your neighbor is anyone who needs your help.

The Law, and the Fifth Commandment in particular, requires that you love your neighbor as yourself, no matter who they are, whether you like them, whether they are a tax collector or sinner, friend or foe. Every single human being is created by God and redeemed by His Son, which means that He cares about how you treat them, just as He cares about how they treat you. So, when Jesus asks the lawyer at the end of the parable, "Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" and the lawyer says, "The one who showed him mercy," Jesus responds, "You go, and do likewise."

But that still doesn't solve the problem, does it? Again, knowing the Law and *doing* the Law are two completely different things; and not just doing it, but doing it *perfectly*, loving God and loving neighbor *without fail*.

¹ See note in Arthur Just's commentary, *Luke: 9:51-24:53*, 448.

And that's why, I think, Luke follows up this passage with the next, which is the account of Jesus at the home of sisters Mary and Martha. Luke records,

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42)

I don't think this is here by accident. Luke is so good at arranging the material in his gospel in order to draw out certain themes, and what better way to follow up the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which is about what it means to love and serve your neighbor, than with this account of what it means to *be* loved and served.

It all goes back to that first question the lawyer asked Jesus: "What must *I do* to inherit eternal life?" Was this not Martha's attitude, as well? It says that she was "distracted with much serving." Distracted from what? From sitting at Jesus' feet and *receiving* from Him, which is what Mary did, and Jesus calls this "the good portion." Like the lawyer, Martha had it in her head that she had to "do, do, do." But this left her anxious and troubled about many things, because no matter how much she did, there was always more to do, more than she was *able* to do. Now, we know that the Law is good, and that we should treasure it "more than gold" (Ps. 19:10), but that doesn't change the fact that it cannot save. There is nothing you can *do* to inherit eternal life. And if you try, then you will be just as anxious and troubled as Martha, because it is an impossible standard. "You must be *perfect*," says Jesus, "as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48), which is why we, too, end up looking for ways of "lowering the bar," whether that means narrowing the scope of the Law, as the lawyer tried to do with Jesus, or excusing ourselves and blaming others so that we don't feel so bad about what we've done and left undone.

But none of that's necessary.

Eternal life is not something you earn, it's something you *receive*.

It's a *service* rendered by God Himself to sinners who have been stripped, beaten, and left for dead by the Law. As Paul writes in Romans 7, "I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and *I died*" (verse 7). And when you're lying there, broken, bloodied, and bruised, will the Law save you? Will it come to

your rescue? No, but, like the priest and the Levite in the parable, it will coldly and uncaringly pass by on the other side. What you need is a Good *Samaritan*, despised and rejected by men, who will condescend to be with you and show mercy, to bear your burdens and spare no expense in seeing to your recovery.

And that is precisely what we have in Jesus. Jesus needed no lowering of the bar, but because of His divine nature, He was able to clear it with room to spare. He loved His neighbors—*all* of them—as Himself, stopping to help those whom no one else would.² Considered by many to be the “bad guy,” Jesus was, in fact, better than all of us combined. And yet, He doesn’t hold that against us; He is *for* us, and He always has been. He didn’t *want* us to die, which is why *He did*, giving Himself into death, bearing the burden of our sin, sparing no expense with the shedding of His holy, precious blood, that we might die eternally. And now, He lives! He is risen indeed, and He has eternal life to give to all who, by God’s grace, humble themselves to stop what they’re doing and come and sit at His feet and receive it. For by His wounds we are healed, and by His love we love.

So, who is your neighbor? Take a look around. But keep your eyes firmly fixed on Jesus, trusting in Him who came to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many. Do *this*, and you will live, even though you die, for in Christ, *our* Good Samaritan, it is already done.

In ☩ Jesus’ name. Amen.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What was the lawyer trying to do by asking Jesus the question, “And who is my neighbor?”
2. How do we try to make the Law easier?
3. Why is this unnecessary?
4. How is Jesus like the Good Samaritan?

² Like blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46f, for one.