

Sermon¹ Pentecost 8 - July 10, 2016

“The Lawyer and the Good Samaritan”

Luke 10:25-37



Dear friends in Christ,
Grace and peace from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,
Our text today is one of the most familiar and well-loved of Jesus' many parables. It's the story of the Good Samaritan. But really, we could call it the story of “The Lawyer and the Good Samaritan.”

You see, there's something that happens that prompts Jesus to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan. It's a little exchange that Jesus has with a lawyer in the crowd: “And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?”²⁷ 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 neighbour as yourself.”²⁸ And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

Now when it says “lawyer” here—“a lawyer stood up to put him to the test”—when it says “lawyer,” it refers to someone who would be an expert in the Law of Moses, the Torah. This would be someone who is very knowledgeable in all the laws given to Israel through Moses, recorded in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—all the civil laws, religious laws, ceremonial laws, and moral laws. And this expert in the Law is trying to test Jesus, to get his take on a very important question: “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” the man asks. An important question, no doubt. What could be more important than gaining eternal life? Because if you don't have that, then death is the end for you—and maybe something worse.

But notice what seems to be lurking in the lawyer's question: What shall “I do” to inherit eternal life? He seems to think that by his doing something he can earn his way to eternal life. The truth is, though, there is nothing you can do that will be good enough

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to merit everlasting life. Your works won't cut it. But this fellow doesn't grasp that yet. So Jesus wants to straighten him out on this, to disabuse him of the notion that you can work your way up the ladder to heaven. Maybe we need to get that straight, too.

The lawyer asks a Law question. So Jesus turns it around and sees if the man can come up with a Law answer. That's the arena this guy is thinking in. Jesus asks him: "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" In other words, what would you have to do if you're going to gain eternal life on the basis of the Law?

The man gives his answer: "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." Now that actually is a brilliant answer, as far as it goes. That is an absolutely accurate summary of God's Ten Commandments: Love God with everything you've got, and love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. In fact, on another occasion, Jesus himself uses that same twofold summary to talk about the Ten Commandments. And so we also, in our theology, talk about "the two tables of the Law." Love God, love your neighbor.

Jesus commends the lawyer's answer: "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." "Do this," and you will live. Ah, there's the rub! Do we "do this"? Do we love God and love our neighbor well enough to merit eternal life? Answer: No. I know I don't love God as much as I ought to. And you don't, either, I'm pretty confident in saying, knowing human nature—and what God's Word says about our sinful nature—as I do. Likewise with loving my neighbor as myself. I've got the loving-myself part down pretty pat, but it's the loving-my-neighbor thing I have trouble with. How about you?

Well, this lawyer thinks he does perform the Law well enough. Oh, as long as he can narrow down who qualifies as his neighbor. Lawyers are experts at parsing words and looking for loopholes, and this guy right now is scrambling to make himself look good. I mean, he himself has just given the right answer about how to earn eternal life according to the Law, so he's pretty much painted himself into a corner. He's got to be able to meet the criteria he's already laid down. Now I suppose he thinks he's good to go on the loving-God part; he takes that for granted. If only he can limit loving his neighbor to only those people he already likes—well, I guess he's home free, then.

So the lawyer, “desiring to justify himself,” our text says, asks a follow-up question of Jesus: “And who is my neighbor?” In other words, who qualifies to get my love? If I can eliminate the bad people, and the disgusting people, and the people who would inconvenience me, then I think I just might be able to do this.

But Mr. Lawyer, hey, you’re missing the point of the commandment. “Love your neighbor as yourself” does not put a limit on who your neighbor is. And that’s where Jesus takes it next with the parable he now tells.

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.” Well, those bad guys, the robbers, obviously they are not very loving. They beat the guy up, for goodness’ sakes! I’m glad I’m better than those robbers! I haven’t beaten anybody up and robbed them.

Jesus continues his story, with the poor beat-up guy still lying there half-dead on the road. “Now by chance a priest was going down that road. . . .” Oh, a priest! Here’s a good guy for our story! I mean, who could be more pious and religious than a priest? I’m sure he’ll do the right thing according to the Law. “A priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.” Oops! Mr. Priest doesn’t do anything. He doesn’t hurt the guy, but then, he doesn’t help him, either. Well, at least he’s keeping himself ceremonially clean by not coming into contact with what might be a dead body.

OK, who’s next? “So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.” Passed by on the other side. Mr. Levite doesn’t help, either. Anyone? Anyone? Mr. Beat-up Half-dead Guy can’t last much longer. Will this story have a hero?

“But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion.” A Samaritan? Really, Jesus, a Samaritan? You make the hero of your story some marginalized guy that we all kind of look down upon? Well, someone kind of like Jesus himself. Marginalized. Looked down upon. An outsider to the insider circles of the Judaism of the day.

So it’s this Samaritan who comes to where the injured man is, and he has compassion on him. Just like the Son of Man came down from heaven and came to

where we are, lying half-dead on the road, unable to save ourselves. Jesus looks at us, and he has compassion on us. He is moved with love, and his love moves him into action.

Which is what the Samaritan in the story does. “He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.” Loving your neighbor means actually helping your neighbor, not passing by on the other side. And so Jesus comes to us with healing, his great restorative care. It is by Jesus himself being wounded—beaten up by soldiers, whipped, nailed to a cross—it is by his wounds we are healed, healed for everlasting life.

Christ’s love is sacrificial love, like how the Samaritan helps the man in the story: “Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’”

In the same way, Jesus pays the price, whatever it takes, for us to be saved. And, like the Samaritan supplied the innkeeper, so Christ gives the church the resources we need to extend his love to others until he comes back. This is the church’s work of mercy.

Now we see what loving your neighbor looks like, both in the story that Jesus tells, and in the story that Jesus lived, in the life and death and resurrection with which Jesus loves us.

So Jesus brings this story home to the lawyer. Of the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan, “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” Look what Jesus does with the lawyer’s original question. The lawyer asked, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus turns it around and says, “It’s not about who qualifies to be your neighbor and thus receive your love. No, it’s about you being a neighbor to others, whoever happens to come across your path. That’s what loving your neighbor is all about.”

So, who proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers? “The one who showed him mercy,” the lawyer rightly responds. And Jesus says, “You go, and do likewise.” Yes, you go out and try that, Mr. Lawyer. See how well you do. I bet you’ll fall short. You can’t save yourself by means of the Law.

No, you and I cannot gain eternal life by our works. If we're going to have eternal life, we're going to inherit it, inherit it as a gift. So give up on justifying yourself, admit your sins, your lack of love, and receive the free gift of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ your Savior. Joined to Jesus in Holy Baptism, you become an heir with him, and this is how you inherit eternal life—it's the only way. Then, yes, you can take this love you've received from God, and you can and will show this Good Samaritan love, this Christ-like love, to others. To your neighbor, that is, any person who happens to come across your path.

Dear friends, the good news today is this: Jesus is our Good Samaritan. He comes to us where we are, he has compassion on us, and he does everything it takes to give us the care and the healing we need. Oh, and one more thing: He also teaches us Christians how to love our neighbor. How to become good Samaritans to those who are in need.

In His name, amen.