

June 14 2020

Good

²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷He 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." ²⁸And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." ²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10: 25-37)

⁹and the LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, ¹⁰when you obey the LORD your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

¹¹Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ¹²It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" ¹³Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" ¹⁴No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. (Deut. 30: 9-14)

The road is long, with many a winding turn. Those of us who are children of the '60's remember these words as a beginning. The beginning of the song, "He Ain't heavy." The rest of the title is, "He's my brother." As we pursue the depth of the familiar story of the "Good Samaritan" this morning, this song can quickly called to mind in spite of my poor singing voice!

When the lawyer asks, "who is my neighbor," Jesus tells the parable of the man who helped a stranger stranded and struggling at the side of the road. He is nearly dead and people are passing him by. They see his pain, they recognize the injustice of his situation and yet they do not respond. Jesus offers no explanation as to why they do not respond. He does not judge their lack of response. He merely observes that they do not help. It is important that we follow Jesus' lead at this point. We do not know why the two offer no help. We do not know their situation or circumstance.

One person does stop. We recognize the one. He is a "Samaritan." We want the priest, even the Levite, the ones who attend church regularly, the ones who worship with us, lead us in worship...we want them to be the ones who stop but they are not the ones.

The one who stops is the one who seems to be an enemy. When Jesus tells the story for the first time, the ones hearing it would think of the Samaritan as an enemy. He was from one of the towns in Luke Chapter nine that did not welcome Jesus. Just last week, we learned that when the disciples came to those towns that would not receive them they were supposed to wipe the dust off their feet in protest against them. This "Samaritan" was from one of those towns. James and John wanted to call down from heaven fire to rain on people such as this. This was the one who stopped.

But let's back up a bit. I fear I have gotten ahead of myself. I need to remind you that this is a parable. Parables are stories. The characters are made up. The purpose is to convey a truth that cannot be born out in real life. The reality is that there is no clear and present example. In short, the "Good Samaritan" does not exist in real life. The "Samaritan" exists as a response to a question, actually, the response to the second of two questions.

Jesus was teaching. One of the best practices of teachers is to be good listeners. While Jesus was teaching on this particular day, one of the members of the congregation gathered had a question. I've got to say, this is my favorite part of the teaching I do in sermons on Sunday mornings. When someone has a question, it means they are listening. I like to think people are listening. I'm pretty sure Jesus would like to think the same thing.

For this reason, I do not believe Jesus was put off when the man stood up. I do not believe Jesus was apprehensive when the man asked the question to test him. There is nothing in this passage to cause me to believe the lawyer is an adversary. The fact that he is a lawyer might give some of us 21st century folks pause but if we put aside some of our prejudice, perhaps we can recognize that the lawyer just has a question.

His question is our question isn't it. His question is the one we are all wanting an answer to and even after two thousand years, it is a question we would really like to be certain of. Jesus has been teaching about life and the lawyer stands up to ask, "What must I do?" "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Already, the story teller has mentioned at least three times (Luke 1.77, 2.30, 3.6) that eternal life is possible. The lawyer... and we want to know how to get it.

Jesus is glad for the question but, again following best practices of a teacher, he answers the question with a question. You are a lawyer he says. I might say, you know the Bible. What does it say there. Jesus says, "What does the Law say? What does it say there?"

Knowing the law, the man answers using Deuteronomy 6: 5 and Leviticus 19: 12. Love God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind and love your neighbor as yourself. With this answer, the man demonstrates his serious and studious consideration of the materials he has. Not just coincidentally, he is the first person to

ever associate these two commands. No where before this moment in the Bible are these two verses brought together for a single purpose.

We can almost feel the pause as Jesus applauds the man's thoughtful and revelatory response and acknowledges that the person has before him everything he needs in order to have eternal life. He just needs to do these things.

At this point, I imagine the lawyer and all of us listening to him are thinking, it just can't be that easy...can it? God has spent thousands of years in relationship with us, giving us 613 commandments, laying out rules and establishing traditions. This man has just reduced all of that to two easy to follow instructions and this teacher has affirmed that he is correct! How can this be?

The truth is, the lawyer is on the same page with us. It just can't be that simple. How could I have worked all that out he wonders. How could I have made the connections that lead me to eternal life. His wonderings are much the same as all of ours. We have been attending church, listening to teachers, hearing sermons for most of our lives and at some point we wonder if we really get it!

The lawyer just couldn't leave it alone and neither can we. If he hadn't asked the question, surely one of us would have. "Who is our neighbor" he asked for us. Who must we love as our self?

Now Jesus begins a third best practice of teaching. Instead of quoting tired old sources, dusting off ancient toms, Jesus tells a story. Stories are great because they let us step away from our own difficult reality for a moment and imagine a world as we might like it to be. They help us to hear things we might not otherwise hear. They also help the story teller to reveal truths that could not be revealed any other way.

Jesus tells a story!

There was a man traveling down the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, he starts. At once, the crowd gasps. They would have known this road. It is about 18 miles long and it is difficult. There are many turns and twists...easy places for ambush. They know the truth of this road. They would never travel down this road by themselves!

There was a man traveling down this road and he fell in with robbers and bandits! "I knew it, they are thinking! I knew this man was asking for trouble." The man is beaten and battered...robbed and left for dead!

Then our hero approaches...we hope! There is a priest. We want to believe in the priest...or maybe at least as we hear the story, we want to believe in the pastor. He will make things right. He will help the man who has been ravaged!

The priest approaches and sees the man. Eagerly, we wait for the priest to do the "right thing." At least, the right thing as we might describe it.

Instead, the priest sees the man and crosses over to the other side of the road. "What!" We ask! We want to be outraged! How dare the priest not take care of the person

laying in the ditch! Surely, God will punish this man. The beaten man might not have been the neighbor to the priest but the priest is supposed to help everyone. The priest is supposed to set an example. The priest is supposed to be good!

That is our judgment!

Notice here that Jesus makes no such judgment. I believe this point is where the church sometimes gets into trouble. The church wants to extend its role beyond the challenge put in front of it. We want to criticize others for their actions and judge them when we really do not know their story.

Jesus does not tell us why the priest crossed over and did not help the man who was in need. We cannot imagine the reason this priest might have had, but perhaps there is one. We simply do not know.

Since we do not know we have two choices—first, we can find out and perhaps create a teachable moment of our own. (My wife is a teacher and she loves teachable moments) We can get involved with the priest and ask him to explain himself. We can set up rules and establish standards of behavior for the priest and we can impose our worldly standards on the behavior we have just witnessed. We can judge the priest and drive him from the priesthood because of something we know nothing about.

Second, we can recognize that we really do know nothing about the priest's situation. We really have no basis in fact for reaching a conclusion about the man who crossed the road and went along on his way.

I believe Jesus leaves this part of his story unresolved and untold so we can consider our actions for ourselves. In John chapter 8, a young woman accused of adultery is brought to him. All her accusers stand before her with stones in hand, ready to fulfill the law as it is written. Jesus stoops down and writes in the dirt and all the accusers, beginning with the oldest and most respected first, fall away. Jesus looks around and wonders where all the accusers have gone. Since they are not left to accuse, Jesus says, "Neither do I accuse." Go and sin no more.

We know nothing of the priest. We know nothing of his situation or circumstance so perhaps in this instance we should recognize the true meaning of the church. The church is to be an example and not a judge. The church is supposed to follow the leadership of Jesus Christ. His leadership, his teaching in this teachable moment is beyond judgment and perhaps ours should be also. Our judgment of the priest does not help us to get to the question the lawyer asked.

It does, however get us to the Levite. Levites are the sons of Aaron. They are also supposed to be the ones who know and understand scripture. They are supposed to be the ones who attend worship regularly. When we hear the Levite being introduced into the story, we can quickly forget about the priest. The Levite is to be the hero of our story. The invitation to "Love neighbor" does come from instructions to the Levites after all.

When we learn that the Levite also crosses the road and goes on his way with out helping the man, we are again incensed.

Again, Jesus gives us no explanation for the man who does not help the beaten battered stranger. Again, Jesus offers no judgment. Neither should we...but still we wonder!

Who will help this man? Who will tend to him, care for him, see him and respond to him?

Now that our curiosity is piqued, Jesus introduces a third character on the road. The man's ethnicity is the first trait Jesus introduces. The man is a Samaritan. Samaritans are different from Jews. Samaritans are unclean. They are undereducated. They are lazy. They are unacceptable. Jews are to have no contact with them.

We know this to be true, right. We know this from John chapter 4. The woman at the well was Samaritan. She asks Jesus, "How can you a Jew ask me, a Samaritan woman to give you a drink. Jews and Samaritans have nothing to do with each other."

Samaritans are not to be trusted. (Let all who have ears, hear.)

As Jesus introduces this dirty, despicable character to the story, perhaps the lawyer is thinking, wow! This man is going to be disappointed. He has traveled along the road to a better place so he could steal and rob and sell drugs and perpetrate other criminal acts on the unsuspecting people of the land. The man in the ditch has already been beaten, battered and left for dead. There is nothing left to steal from him.

Perhaps we are thinking, "How dare this low life come up into our country and pillage and plunder one of our citizens." Surely someone will come along and send this fellow packing.

Perhaps, the lawyer was listening for a long time as Jesus told, last week of the Samaritan town that did not welcome Jesus. Perhaps, Jesus was going to use the Samaritan to define people who were not our neighbors, people to whom we have no responsibility.

The lawyer and all the crowd were listening intently now. Where was Jesus going with this story.

You could almost feel the tension as the Samaritan approached. Was he going to finish off the man who had been beaten and left for dead? Was he going to ridicule and revile the man for thinking he could travel down this dangerous road alone? What was going to happen next?

I imagine a pause here. Perhaps a long one! Then I imagine another gasp!

The Samaritan, this despicable, low life man who does not know God at all stoops down and sees the man, sees the pain and heartache and is moved to compassion. He helps the man, holds him close, anoints him with oil and pours wine on his wounds.

This man, this less than man from the perspective of the crowd, offers a radical hospitality that has for centuries been taught to the Jewish people. He invites the man into his life and into his heart! He cares! Not only does he care, but he lives his care as directed by psalm 23.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The people hear the story. Their ears are burning as they recognize with the lawyer and with us, that neighbors are not limited to those who look like or act like or sound like us. Neighbors are those who are in our world. John Wesley says it this way . than 200 years ago

"Let us renounce that bigotry and party zeal which would contract our hearts into an insensibility for all the human race, but a small number whose sentiments and practices are so much our own, that our love to them is but self love reflected. With an honest openness of mind let us always remember that kindred between man and man, and cultivate that happy instinct whereby, in the original constitution of our nature, God has strongly bound us to each other."

Even in the 1700's it was recognized that We are responsible for the love of each other. We can never renounce that responsibility and while we cannot judge others for the way they live out that love, we must not, we cannot abdicate our responsibility. In the end, when we stand before God in eternal life, we will be called to account for our own choices. We will not be called for our following of others who might have provided another example. We are accountable to do what is right.

In Deuteronomy, the text that was shared earlier, we can hear the words of God. This command is not too far from you. You do not have to go up to heaven or across the sea to get it. You merely have to open your eyes to what is right in front of you, what is in your mind and in your heart! You know that for the world to change, to get better for you and for your children, love is the only answer! Love of God, love of neighbor. And who is your neighbor...

But, this is only a parable right? This is just a story. This is cute and compelling but it is not real. It cannot be real...or can it?

What if, instead of a parable we look at the story of the Samaritan as a metaphor. What if we recognize the life of Jesus in the story itself. He entered the world from on high. Jerusalem to Jericho is a journey of 18 miles. In that 18 miles you start out about 1800 feet above sea level. At Jericho, you have descended to about 800 feet below sea level. In an 18 mile journey, you descend from on high and gone down to a different world.

In much the same way, Jesus entered the world from on high. He fell in with people who would eventually beat him, batter him and leave him for dead. All of us passed by. All of his saw him hang on the cross. All of us had the opportunity to believe in him and receive him and anoint him and care for him. All of us.

All of us have the opportunity to see him and not pass by. All of us.

All of us have the chance to bring Him into our hearts and care for him and love him!

All of us.

The commandment is two fold. What if the parable addresses the question the lawyer has about the second part, who is my neighbor, by addressing the first one as well.

How are we to love God? With all our heart, our soul, our strength and our mind. We are to anoint God where we meet Him. We are to invite him into the inn. Ironically, there was no room for him there in the beginning but there is room there now.

We are to be the ones who care for Him and bring him back to life and let Him live in us! We are to return for him and walk with him and live with Him everyday.

All of us...everyday.

What if Jesus is the one who is beaten, beaten by this world!

What if we are the ones who are called to be the Good!

It's a long, long road that leads us to who knows where. While we're on our way to there, why not share.

Cause I'm strong, strong enough to carry him. He ain't heavy...he's my brother!

Who is our neighbor? The one who shows mercy! Go and do likewise! Amen!