

Luke 10: 25-37: You Are What You Do

Having been given the privilege to preach from the pulpit of this church, standing at the heart of this diverse community, I have sensed some concern in the air, that somehow my preaching might be based on something other than the Word of God in Scripture, that I might be telling people what to believe, how to live their lives, or how to vote. I can understand this concern, especially now, when it feels like, in our country, there are major collisions in every direction at the crossroad of the law of the land on one hand and the lives of the people on the other.

People of faith through the ages have turned to the Scriptures as authoritative standard of faith and life. Still today, we turn to the Bible to guide us through life and teach us how to live. My task as a Teaching Elder, another name for a pastor, is to preach the gospel in fidelity to the Scriptures and dependence upon the Holy Spirit. This is why we say the Prayer for Illumination before the Scripture is read.

As we search the Scriptures for God's desire for us today, we turn to our One Great Teacher, Jesus. And "teach us how to live; what do I need to do?" was exactly the question that Jesus was asked in the gospel reading for us this morning.

Many of us are familiar with this parable of the Good Samaritan even though it is found only in the Gospel of Luke, but we may not

have noticed that Jesus told this parable as part of his answer to the question from a lawyer, an expert on the Law of Moses, the Torah. The lawyer asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” not as a sincere inquiry but to test Jesus. He is challenging Jesus’ authority even as he calls Jesus “Teacher.” There must have been tension between how this guy interpreted the Law of Moses and what he’d seen Jesus teaching the crowds, as a popular but uncredentialed Galilean.

Asked “what must I do?” to inherit eternal life, which is to belong to the kingdom of God, Jesus responds by asking the lawyer, “what does the Law say?” The lawyer responds with what we’ve come to know as Jesus’s summary of the Law: Love the Lord your God and Love your neighbor as yourself. “Right,” says Jesus, “Do that, and you will live.” But “wanting to justify himself,” the lawyer pushes back with yet another question, “Well, who is my neighbor?” Apparently, in the lawyer’s mind, the term “neighbor” needs a definition, so that he can justify himself in loving some people, while not loving other people and still inherit eternal life. “Well, Jesus, where do you draw the boundary of ‘neighbor-hood’?” the lawyer seems to be saying. The parable of the Good Samaritan zeroes in on this very point.

This “love your neighbor as yourself” imperative comes from the book of Leviticus, part of the Law of Moses. In that context, the neighbor meant one’s fellow Israelites, and in the same chapter a few commandments later, it also says “the alien who resides with you shall be to you as the native-born among you; you shall love the alien, the foreign-born, as yourself.”

Now back to the parable. You may have already heard that the road between Jerusalem and Jericho the man was traveling was a notoriously dangerous road. As luck would have it, the man, supposedly a Jew, fell victim to a brutal attack, and you know what happens next. The first person who came down that road and saw the poor man lying half-dead was a Priest, and he passed by on the other side. Then came a Levite, a temple assistant, and he, too, passed by on the other side.

Now, we can speculate all we want, as to why these persons of religious positions did not act to help the poor man. There are possible, realistic reasons; maybe they thought he was already dead and touching blood, let alone a corpse would make them unclean, preventing them from doing their religious duties, to maybe they thought the victim was a trap by the bandits and they feared they’d be the victim, whatever. We are not told why; all we know is, whatever the reasons, they only served to prevent them from taking any actions.

Then comes a Samaritan. As you may know, the relationship between the Samaritans and the Jews in the time of Jesus was deeply strained. When we read “Samaritan,” elsewhere in the gospel, we know they represent “the other,” the group of people with whom the Jews did not mix. This Samaritan traveler, who had his own business to tend to, sees the injured man and is moved by compassion, which moves him into action, and not just a nice gesture but an act of kindness into which he puts all his heart and soul and strength and mind.

Now, if the third passer-by had been another Jew, the morale of the story would have been simply “a neighbor is whoever shows mercy to those in need.” And, in fact, that’s what the lawyer answers when Jesus asked, “Which of these three, was a neighbor to the man?” The lawyer cannot bring himself to say, “it’s the Samaritan.” The Samaritan showed mercy, yes, but in doing so, he broke free of the social and religious boundary that separated the two of them, and it was the depth and strength of his compassion that empowered him to act in love, and that made all the difference. Whether the lawyer acknowledges it or not, it is this Samaritan whose example Jesus is telling him to follow: Go and do likewise.

In the end, ones who would inherit eternal life, the ones who live in the kingdom of God, are not defined by any worldly condition

or status of who they are, but by their capacity for compassion that moves them into loving action. In God's eyes, you are what you do.

The parable is a story of those who are held back by their own sense of who they are and who the person in need is, on one hand, and the one whose compassion overruled such worldly notion, on the other hand. With this parable, Jesus does not simply remove the boundary delimiting who "my neighbor" is; rather, he stretches it, redrawing the boundary to include especially the people whom we don't think are deserving of our compassion.

In this parable, set in the Jewish culture in Jesus's time, that worldly judgment was the hostility based on ethno-religious identity, but it could be anything. What boundary do we draw that betrays our bias about who is and who is not deserving of our compassion?

I was asked to teach 7th grade Ethics this last Spring semester at Menaul School. I told the school that if they wanted me to teach it, it would have to be Ethics of Jesus and it would be all about the close reading of his parables. The parable of the Good Samaritan was one we spent a lot of time on. The students learned about the historical setting and who those characters were and the meaning they brought to the story. Then they did a reader's theater in Chapel. But the surprise came when I asked them to write their own modern-day

version of this parable in their own life setting. One student wrote this. It's all his own words, used with permission:

“One morning there was a man who was taking drugs and he took so much that he passed out on the sidewalk. A man who was taking a walk passed by him without even stopping to check if he was okay. A policeman who was off duty walked by and didn't care because he wasn't working. Then a person who was in a rush for work stopped and helped the man and drove him to a hospital.”

What struck me about this student's take on the parable is this. Unlike the victim of the robbery in Jesus's story, who was a victim of some external evil acts, this man's passing out on the sidewalk was his own doing. Nowadays we have a better understanding of addiction as a disease, but our society is not very sympathetic to those who are suffering the consequences of their own choices. We let our judgment of such person get in the way of having compassion. “God helps those who help themselves,” many say, mistakenly thinking it's in the Bible. According to the research by a Christian demographer and pollster George Berna, “the belief that this is a phrase that occurs in the Bible, or is even one of the Ten Commandments, is common in the United States... Despite not appearing in the Bible, the phrase topped a poll of the most widely known Bible verses.”

Ethics refers to moral principles that govern a person's behavior or the conducting of an activity. It concerns how we live our lives. The commandment to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbor as ourselves, sets in motion this Circle of Love that starts with the First and the Greatest Commandment, with emphasis on Loving God and obeying God's Will, which leads to the second commandment to love our neighbor as ourself, which activates our compassion for our neighbor, which moves us into loving action, which circles back to Loving God, with the call to practice this ethics now. It is the law of the land in the kingdom of God. Jesus's parables show us what living in this Circle of Love ethics looks like.

As we find ourselves at the crossroad of faith and doubt, conviction and question, in the real-life living of our days, may we continue to turn to the Scriptures for guidance, with the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit, and in the community of faith, that all may inherit eternal life. Amen