The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (C), July 14, 2019

Luke 10:25-37 (esp. v. 36-37)

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In the name of the Father and of the T Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. The Word of God which engages us this morning is based on Luke 10: “[Jesus said,] ’Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You go, and do likewise.’”

## It’s a trap!

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is one we’re all familiar with. We’re so familiar with its contours, characters, and conclusion that it’s easy for us to believe that we’ve mastered it. Like Christmas, the story can lose its wonder after so many retellings. But this was not the case when Jesus first spoke it to a certain lawyer. Let us try to hear it afresh like he did, in order that we might better appreciate God’s Word.

This lawyer begins by asking Jesus a question: “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Some people ask this question innocently: they want to know what kind of person they need to be in order for God to love them. We want to be good people, after all, and so, “tell us how we can do it, Jesus.” This lawyer, however, was not asking an innocent question. Luke tells us that he was putting Jesus to the test. People were trying to get Jesus to blaspheme so that they would have an excuse to kill him, and that’s just what they eventually do.

Jesus responds to this question with a question of his own. This is actually a good way to get someone to show their cards. One of our seminary professors is known for answering many questions with, “Why do you want to know?” When you turn the tables like this, you can reveal someone’s motivations—you can have a better understanding of what’s behind their question. But Jesus doesn’t need to reveal the lawyer’s motivations; he already knows them. He already knows that people like this will eventually accuse him and kill him. Rather, Jesus gives the man the opportunity to repent: “What does God’s Word say about this? What does God himself say makes a person good?”

## Be perfect

The lawyer actually has a good answer for this: “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.” He quotes from Deuteronomy and Leviticus where God rightly sums up the perfection that he demands of his people. What does it mean to be a good person? What does it mean to keep the Ten Commandments? Just this: love God, and love your neighbor.

Jesus gives him a gold star. “Good job. You have answered correctly; you have read your Bible. Do this, and you will live.”

But *is* a person actually worthy of eternal life if he keeps God’s Law? Is Jesus serious when he says, “Do this, and you will live?” Is it actually possible for me to be a good enough person that God will therefore love me?

The lawyer thinks so. In fact, his whole understanding of salvation relies upon the fact that he can earn it. If you cannot be a good enough person for God to love you—if Mother Theresa, and the Dalai Lama, and Mary the Mother of our Lord cannot earn God’s favor—then who on earth can be saved? So of course it must be possible, he thinks.

## Limiting the scope of God’s Word

But the lawyer knows that God’s Law—if it is taken at face value—demands too much of him. He knows that he is not perfect—though he believes he comes about as close as anyone can. And so the lawyer skirts around the perfection that God demands by limiting the *scope* of God’s Law. He says, “And who is my neighbor? Whom exactly do I have to love, and whom do I not need to love?”

Jesus effectively says, “Ah, I see what you did there.” Again, Jesus will not directly answer the man’s misguided, treacherous questions. But rather than asking another question himself like “What does God’s Word say?” or “Why do you want to know?” this time Jesus tells a story.

This lawyer is asking how loving of a person he needs to be in order for God to love him, and so Jesus tells him the Parable of the Good Samaritan. He expects that the lawyer will try to figure out how this story is about him, since this is how Jesus answers his question. With that in mind, what character in this parable is the lawyer supposed to be? Let’s go through the parable carefully, trying to hear it as the lawyer did.

## The Parable of the Discerning Priest/Levite?

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.” Already, this story is off to a bad start. You see, in the Jewish mindset, when you talk about going *to* Jerusalem, you speak of going *up* to Jerusalem. You are going *up* to the place where God is; the temple and heaven become intermingled in this metaphor—going up to Jerusalem means that you’re going toward God and godliness. And so someone going *away* from Jerusalem is going *down* from Jerusalem, *away from God*. In the context of a story like this, a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho is a *sinner*. He is running away from God, much like the prophet Jonah.

This God-fleeing man meets his appropriate doom. Robbers strip him, beat him, and leave him for dead. This guy has gotten what he deserved, because he was living a life of sin. So, from the lawyer’s perspective as he’s hearing this parable, is he supposed to be the God-fleeing man? Surely not! He is trying to inherit eternal life, after all! The lawyer wants to be a good person.

Rather, he hears himself as being the priest and the Levite. These were the good and godly men of the day. They loved the Lord with all their heart, soul, strength, and mind, and they loved their neighbor as themselves. But the trouble is, just like the lawyer, they did not believe that *everyone* was their neighbor. Surely a sinner fleeing from God does not deserve my love. “Who is my neighbor?” Not that heathen! And so, the priest and the Levite pass by on the other side, limiting the scope of God’s command to love their neighbor, just like the lawyer did. If Jesus were to end his parable here, then the lawyer would believe that it was right for the priest and Levite to avoid the beaten sinner. “Who is my neighbor?” Well, the godly priests show that I don’t have to love sinners.

## The Good Samaritan

But then the story takes a turn. A new character is introduced: a Samaritan. If you thought the man fleeing from God was bad, a Samaritan was even worse. Like we talked about a couple weeks ago, Samaritans were half-breeds and mud-bloods who had rejected the Lord. In any story or parable that God’s people would tell at this time in history, the Samaritan was always the bad guy—like the Russians were in American TV and movies during the Cold War: like Rocky and Bullwinkle, James Bond, and season 3 of Stranger Things.

But if the Samaritan is now the bad guy in the story, then what does that mean about the man who was going down from Jerusalem—fleeing from God? And even worse, as the story unfolds, why on earth is the Samaritan the only one who does the right thing? What kind of a story is this, Jesus?!

The Samaritan shows up. But unlike Boris and Natasha, he does not scheme how to destroy all that is good about capitalism—or godliness. Rather, he is a *Good* Samaritan. He actually loves his neighbor as himself, and he considers *everyone* to be his neighbor. The Samaritan has compassion on his *enemy*—a Jew, who would have despised him and avoided him, had they met somewhere on the road. The Samaritan binds up his wounds, lifts him up on his donkey or whatever, finds an inn, and pays two days’ wages (which would be a couple hundred bucks for us). He treats the beaten man like a good big brother would.

At this point, the lawyer must be taken aback. He had asked Jesus what sort of neighbor he is supposed to love, but that isn’t the point of Jesus’ story; otherwise the parable would have focused on the man who was beaten and just *one* person who either did or did not help him. Rather, Jesus *asks* *the lawyer* his own question: “Which of these three, do you think, proved *to be a neighbor* to the man who fell among the robbers? Rather than limiting the list of people you have to love, consider how to be a loving person to everyone, even your enemies (you know, like me).”

## The parable interpreted

Jesus has just told the lawyer this story, but just who is he supposed to be in the story? Surely he’s not the sinner who was fleeing from God and rightly met his doom. Possibly he’s the priest or Levite who don’t feel the need to love *everyone*—especially sinners. Certainly he’s not the Samaritan—even if he is supposed to be the good guy! What is this parable about?

Every parable has one main point per main character or group of characters. Every parable teaches us something about God and something about humanity. In the Parable of the Rich Fool, we learn that God himself numbers our days, and so it would be dumb of us to store up the wrong kind of treasure—two points for the two characters. In the Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, we learn that people can be lost from God but he desires to rescue them. In the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, we learn that Christ will come to judge, as well as how the innocent and the guilty will be identified. Each parable has one main point per main character or group of characters. In addition, while each parable is spoken to specific people in specific situations, they also apply more generally to God’s people in some way. They speak about the human condition and God’s love. This is why it’s fair game to read ourselves into the parables.

How about the Parable of the Good Samaritan? Who are the main characters, and what are the main points? First, you have the man going down from Jerusalem. Through this character, we learn that, even though someone flees from God, God may still rescue him from his enemies and from death. Next, you have the priest and the Levite, who can be taken together. Through them, we learn that to have the lawyer’s attitude of “But who is my neighbor—do I have to help *everybody*?”—to have this attitude makes you a bad person rather than a hero. Finally, we have the Samaritan. This despised outcast teaches us of Jesus, who will soon give himself up—his time, his money, and even his life—for us. And, like the Samaritan, by giving himself up for us, Jesus rescues and heals us. He sacrifices of himself to save our lives.

## The parable applied

Who are you in this parable? You should not want to be the priest/Levite; through these characters Jesus condemns the lawyer who is putting him to the test. So are you the bruised sinner or the despised hero? First and foremost, you are someone who flees from God, who strays from the truth, who doubts, and who rightly has his world fall apart. You fall prey to all sorts of evil. You need to be rescued. Thankfully, the Christ-Samaritan does just that. He gives himself up in order to save you and heal you. At the beginning of the reading, we heard the lawyer’s question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life? What must I do to be a good person? How can I get God to love me?” Here we find our answer: you can do nothing, you heathen! You cannot keep God’s Law; you cannot “do this and live.” By default, you don’t even want eternal life; you just want to get away from God. But God loves you anyway. He saves you. He rescues you. He picks you up. He brings you home. He heals your wounds. He pays every cost. He makes you healthy, complete, and whole. Jesus makes you a good person, and so now you are.

But then, after the parable, after Jesus’ final question of “Who proved to be a neighbor?” and the lawyer’s answer… after all of this Jesus tells us that we are not *only* the bruised sinner. Jesus says, “You go, and do likewise. You go and be a good neighbor, too. You go and give up everything you are and everything you have in order to love everybody. You are now a *Christ*ian, after all. There are no limits in this for you, just like there are no limits in it for me.”

## Conclusion

Dear friends in Christ, what must you do to inherit eternal life? What kind of person do you need to be in order for God to love you?

You need to be perfect. That is, either you need to be Christ himself, or you need to be in Christ. Jesus places no limitations on how much he will give up for sinners like you. He was despised, rejected, and killed… *by* sinners like you and *for* sinners like you. But now he lives eternally, and so now you have eternal life in him.

Because you are in Christ, you have more than you could ever need. You can give away all you have, and God will give you still more; this is your eternal inheritance. So give freely, in word, in deed, in time and energy. There’s a lot of fellow sinners who could use a hand. Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.