

Good morning. It is good for us to be together today.

We have just heard what may be one of the most famous passages of scripture in the entirety of the Holy Bible. It is perhaps second only to the parable of the prodigal son in Jesus's own greatest hits stories. These stories by Jesus are so familiar to us, so etched in memories of murals on Sunday School room walls and coloring pages, on greeting cards and bookmarks you put in your bible or prayer book and forget about, these stories have been domesticated by the church into something a little more palatable than their first audiences would have heard.

Let's back up just a bit. What is a parable? Is it just a short story told by Jesus extemporaneously to befuddle and amuse crowds in first century Palestine? Was Jesus a bad teacher? The meaning sometimes seems to be lost on us. Occasionally the disciples as portrayed in the Gospels seem not to get it. We have domesticated the parables of Jesus and made them into something we can live with without too much trouble. I'd like for us to tackle this famous parable today in three sections: First, the framing of the lawyer's first question, then the lawyer's second question, and finally the parable of the Good Samaritan itself. Perhaps in so doing, we can recover the vividness and strangeness that captivated Jesus' first audience.

Even in the setup of the story, we are given clues to the tone and subtext that get lost on a cursory reading. A lawyer stood up to *test* Jesus, and addressed him as Teacher. This testing language should remind us of all things of the words of the Lord's Prayer. The word is the same as Lead us not into *temptation*, or the modern rendering, save us from the time of *trial*. The very thing that Jesus' followers are taught to pray that they never have to endure is lurking in the motivation of this lawyer. Also, addressing Jesus as Teacher, is a red flag in Luke's Gospel. Those who call Jesus Teacher don't really know his true identity as Lord. So the danger alarms are definitely going off with this guy before we even really get started.

Finally we get to his first question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus is often the object of trick questions, and this one is a doozy. You don't really *do* anything to inherit eternal life. The lawyer is *commodifying* eternal life. If there is anything, any action he can perform, then he hopes he can execute it with the utmost efficiency and perhaps even have it all wrapped up by supper time. He is trying to buy eternal life with a coupon. Even the word for *do* (what must I do) he uses suggests a one and done action, an event once occurring and completed. Jesus in his masterful way answers the lawyer's question with another question. "What is written in the law, how do you read it?" Jesus hopes that in asking this question, the lawyer will give the right answer, but also rethink his initial question. He *does* give the right answer, but seems not to have corrected his motives, "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." Jesus sensing this disconnect says, "*Do* this and you will live." Jesus flips the word for doing into a demand for ongoing relationship rather than an economic exchange. The life of faith is enacted in engagement rather than negotiation. Faithful living occurs along a lifetime trajectory rather than a momentary transaction.

I'd like to pause and do the first in what will probably be an ongoing sidebar through my sermons and teaching here. To quote a prominent New Testament scholar at Vanderbilt, "You don't have to make Jews look bad to make Jesus look good." There is often a false strain of

biblical interpretation that makes the assumption that 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews were part of a legalistic tradition focused on carefully following a set of rigid laws and rules. This couldn't be farther from the truth. The lawyer's problem was not that he was a closed-minded Jew whose imagination couldn't fathom the life of fidelity and grace that Jesus was offering. Deeply imbedded in the identity of Jewish people is following Torah as a response to the gracious gift of God's covenant with them. The truth is that the lawyer has a human problem that we all share of wanting to control the terms of the contract, keeping God and neighbor at arm's length.

So the lawyer hasn't had enough. In fact, I think he is blissfully unaware of the verbal Judo Jesus has executed on him, or at least only aware enough to want to save some face. The Gospel gives us some more insight into the lawyer's posturing, he wants to justify himself, the literal meaning is to make himself "look right" (think about Microsoft Word justifying margins) in front of everyone else. To this end he asks his second question, "Who is my neighbor?" What he is really asking is, "Who is *not* my neighbor? Who can I get away with neglecting? Whose lack of food and shelter can I ignore?" The Torah outlines very specifically the duties of neighborliness. It even outlines the treatment of outsiders and enemies. Jesus further commands love of enemies. In fact, he may be appealing to the lawyer's literacy, remember not everyone could read in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. When he asks, "How do you read the law?" he may be highlighting the linguistic similarity between the Hebrew words for neighbor and evil. They have the same consonants but different vowels. Hebrew text was not pointed with vowels until the Middle Ages. Jesus is saying that even in the words of the law there is a connection between how we treat neighbors and enemies and there should be no difference. Since the lawyer seems to be a glutton for punishment, he stands there ready for an answer to his misguided question. And we finally get to the story.

Even the way Jesus begins the story is a game changer. If you are really listening the way his first audience might have heard it. "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho," he has left the character purposefully vague so as to invite the listener into a particular role in the story. As much as the names of so many of our charitable organizations would want us to identify with the Good Samaritan, we are hopelessly beaten, bruised, and stripped of our dignity in a ditch on a familiar but dangerous road. We are the traveler waiting for rescue, but who will it be? We like the lawyer are listening, suddenly feeling the awful truth of what Jesus is telling us. So often we are distracted by heaven, that we forget the importance of our present responsibilities.

Now Jesus employs the same strategy you might use in telling a joke or a funny story. There are always three. Three wishes, three guys walk into a bar... the first two are the set up and the last one is the surprise punchline. There is the third element you expect vs the way it is subverted to make the joke funny. So if I said to you this morning, "Father, Son, and...." or "Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, and ...." OR "Harry, Ron, and....." Or "Mike D, MCA, and ....". We could go on. So Jesus sets up this rule of three with a Priest who sees us beaten and half-dead and walks by on the other side, then a Levite who also ignores the situation. The 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish imagination would immediately have completed the trifecta with "Priest, Levite, and ....Israelite." But that is not what we get in the parable is it? We are on an emotional roller-coaster laying in that ditch looking up for help. Surely if the priest or the levite don't save us then some decent citizen will find us. But no it turns out to be our worst enemy staring down at us

with compassion. One author put it this way, Jesus subverts the rule of three by placing the Samaritan last with the effect of a modern day list like “Larry, Moe, and Osama Bin Laden.”

Jesus is in dangerous territory. He is asking us to imagine having to accept help from the person we despise most. The situation is bleak. All at once we are indignant but also helpless and in need.

Martin Luther King, Jr. ‘s interpretation of the text is quite astute on this point. The attitude of the priest and the levite are essentially wrapped up in the question, “What will happen to *me* if I stop and help this person? There are bandits on the road. It is dangerous. How much will it cost me to stop and engage with this person, bereft of dignity, money, and nearly their life? In King’s interpretation it is the Good Samaritan whose posture is correct. He says to himself, “What will happen to *this person* if I do not stop and help?” And cost is not an issue for him. He lavishes oil and wine to soothe and clean the wounds, literally trauma in the Greek. He pays for the person in the ditch to have a place to recover and someone to tend to that trauma until his return promising to pay back what is spent on their healthcare.

Jesus, I’m sure with compassion in his eyes turns to the lawyer and says, “Now which one of these acted as a neighbor?” Now I don’t know about you, but it is hard for me to accept help even from people I know and love. It is humbling, and at the same time it breaks down barriers and build bonds. In one of the saddest turns in scripture, the lawyer replies maintaining his cold distance from the flesh and blood reality of human connection of the inner workings of neighbor love and love for God. He answers in the abstract to Jesus’ question, “who was your neighbor when you were down there in that ditch staring hopeless into the blazing sun?” He can’t say the name- *the one*, he says, not the Samaritan.. just *the one* who showed mercy. I think it was Jesus’ way of saying goodbye to someone who just couldn’t get it. “Go and do likewise.”

So here are some Gospel takeaways, this text is so rich and I have already preached too long:

The life of faith is a trajectory – a direction in which we are going our whole lives long. A trajectory not a transaction where we pay and move on with our lives as if living out lives in service to neighbor and worship of God were not our holy vocation.

We need to shift our focus away from what will happen to us, and focus on what will happen to the other, because from time to time and possibly in the future, the other will be us.

Focus on fidelity in our relationships to God and our neighbors without regard to getting it exactly right or getting our box checked. The life of grace requires an open posture and a “Good news” trajectory. We do not own it or direct it. We live into our calling and in so doing become more human and more authentically who God has created us to be in doing the work we have been given to do.

To speak of loving God and loving neighbor does not require theological precision; it does not ask for a particular location of worship, it does not speak to a particular book, the torah the Samaritan Pentateuch the Christian bible the Qur’an or the book of Mormon, loving God and loving neighbor have to be enacted in our bodies and in our neighborhood.

*I have said these things to you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.*

This sermon is greatly indebted to the work of AJ Levine, especially *Short Stories by Jesus*.