

Luke 10:25-37 The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Go and do Likewise

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"Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' New Revised Standard translation

We know what happens next. We know the parable. We know about priests and Levites who pass by a wounded member. We know about the Samaritan -- the outcast and unclean, in Jewish eyes who comes to the rescue. But do we ever answer the lawyer's question, let alone live in Jesus response?

To be fair, the lawyer mentioned in our text was not a solicitor you'd enlist to manage civil matters of the law. No, our lawyer was a scholar of religious studies -- of the Pentateuch, the laws of Moses, the first five books of our Old Testament. These scrolls contained some 613 commandments on what you could and could not do as a member of the promised people of Israel. Laws on cleanliness, the preparation of sacrifices, but most importantly how one is obedient to God.

But while this inquisitor may not have been a lawyer in today's understanding, he certainly knew how to look for loopholes -- tiny cracks in the fabric of the law that might allow us to justify who was 'in' and who was 'out'. Or as Nicola Sturgeon might say, don't see how far you can stretch the restrictions, but live within the intended purpose.

For the lawyer it was never a question of earning salvation. The people of Israel wanted God to redeem them--to fulfill God's promise made through Abraham. The lawyer knew the law and the commandments to love the Lord God with every part of your being but what his mind could so easily grasp, his heart could not. The law was an abstraction in which he could qualify his position within the community. "If I'm in, then who is out? Who am I justified that I should treat rightly, and who can I ignore? Who is my neighbor?

Monday's London Times reported that the director general of the World Health Organization fears that the world is at the brink of a catastrophic moral failure in the inequitable distribution of the Covid vaccine. As drug companies profit, and wealthy countries are able to purchase large quantities of the drugs, poor countries are left wanting.

Is Malawi our neighbor? What about in our own community of Kinross? Is the woman that lets her dog run off lead in the park--is she my neighbor? Are the three lads that hang out at the bus stop across from church, are they my neighbor? Is the bully who picks on me at school, is he my neighbor? The problem with defining our neighbors is that it will always leave someone out.

African American evangelist and leader in the civil rights movement of the 1960's, Martin Luther King, Jr., reflected on the parable of the Good Samaritan in his book "Strength to Love."

He wonders if the daunting question faced by the priest and Levite (and us all) is what will happen to me? What will happen to me if I step in? What will happen to me if I speak the truth in love? What are the risks of being a good neighbor? But King continues, perhaps what we should be asking is, "If I do not stop to help, what will happen to this man?"

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk his position, his prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others. In dangerous valleys and hazardous pathways, he will lift some bruised and beaten brother to a higher and nobler life."

Prophetic words from a man who would later lose his life in an act of hatred. But King did not waiver, until the end of his life, he walked the path of the Good Samaritan.

"For the moment of all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." Hebrews 12:11-12.

I can't remember her first name. She was one of my neighbors I passed on my daily walks with my dog, "Bob." Unlike my current pup, Riley, Bob was a bear of a dog. He was part chow and part Labrador Retriever who hated the water, looked like a black bear, but was as gentle as a lamb. We lived in the city without a garden, so numerous walks were part of our daily routine. We'd see our neighbor from time to time, who, from all appearances was a sweet and benign sort of woman. We'd exchange a wave as we pass and then continue on our way.

One day, I saw the woman being carried out on a stretcher to a waiting ambulance. Most of her face covered by an oxygen mask, but unmistakable pain in her reddened sad eyes. I watched the ambulance pull away and then continued on my journey home.

A few weeks later I saw the woman again standing in her front yard. This time instead of waving, I stopped to see how she was. To my shock I was nearly knocked over by the number of expletives spewing from what I had presumed a "sweet little old lady." But I stood and listened as through the cursing she shared that the doctor had stripped her of her driver's license because she had a bad heart. Furious at this loss of independence, she raged at the world and promised to defy him. I listened, and finally after reflecting how the doctor's concern might be not just for her own well-being, but for other drivers on the road, I offered to show her how to ride the bus--a new practice I had discovered after selling my car.

She followed me home that day, still fussing and fuming...but not so much...and as we reached the gates of the seminary, I asked her if she believed in Jesus Christ. Her emphatic response was: "No. Yes. I'm presbyterian." I reached out my hand to her shoulder and asked if I could pray with her. And in that moment, as her shoulder softened and the weight of all that anger abated, I knew the mercy of the Lord.

I would see my neighbor many times after that on my daily walks. We'd stop for a chat. She'd invite me in for ice cream at 9 o'clock in the morning, but I can't recall if I ever did show her how to ride the bus. Maybe that wasn't important. Maybe being her neighbor was.

Fred Rogers was a presbyterian minister who happened to better known as ‘Mr. Rogers’, a children’s television program broadcast in the U.S. The program aimed at showing the value of every human life -- on what it means to be a good neighbor. Fred’s life has since been made into a movie, but if you ever happen to find an original copy of “Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood”, I’d encourage you to watch it. There are no glitzy special effects or snazzy music, just simple truths.

Fred said, “As human beings, our job in life is to help people realize how rare and valuable each one of us really is, that each of us has something that no one else has - or ever will have - something inside that is unique to all time. It’s our job to encourage each other to discover that uniqueness and to provide ways of developing its expression...if you could only sense how important you are to the lives of those you meet; how important you can be to the people you may never dream of. There is something of yourself that you leave at every meeting with another person.”

Perhaps we see things differently this side of Easter. We know that our salvation has been secured through Jesus’ death and resurrection on the cross. We know that we are now safely hidden within the fabric of Christ through our baptism by the Holy Spirit. We know that the gift of God through Jesus Christ is a free and unmerited act of grace by God that no work, or good deed, could ever earn. Yet, knowing all this-- the great sacrifice of our Lord and the mercy demonstrated by our God, do we still look for loopholes? Do we think of Jesus as an abstraction and thereby our neighbors, too, as defined by who’s in and who’s out? Perhaps, we can be so intent looking at the symbols of our worship that we lose sight of their meaning, thereby robbing ourselves of opportunities to glorify God through simple acts of being a good neighbor.

Let’s pray:

Loving God,

These are difficult days separated from our loved ones and friends. Tensions and anxiety are high and there’s an aching sense of despondency as the virus continues undaunted, and days of lockdown continue. For those of us of a certain age, we remember better days and wonder when they might return, but for our young whose lives are just beginning, it is especially difficult in ways we can’t even imagine or articulate. None of us is certain how these days may come to an end, but may we ask that you hold us together in your precious arms, that you give us presence of mind and spirit to reach out to a neighbor in need, or courageous enough to seek a neighbor when we find ourselves in danger. We ask this in the precious name of Jesus Christ, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.