

LET'S ASK THE RIGHT QUESTION

Sermon, July 14, 2019

Text: Luke 10:25-37

Today's parable is perhaps the most familiar of all Jesus' parables, and some would even argue it's one of the most well-known short stories in *all* of literature. The term "good Samaritan" is used as a common metaphor for any charitable person, who, like the man in the parable, rescues or helps out a needy stranger. We have hospital after hospital named for the hero of this story; in fact, this congregation helped support my daughter Hannah when she served on a short term mission trip at the Good Samaritan General Hospital in the Dominican Republic in 2014. There are Good Samaritan Societies, Good Samaritan Awards, Good Samaritan Foundations, Good Samaritan churches, Good Samaritan nursing homes, Good Samaritan mission organizations, even Good Sam Recreational Vehicle clubs. We have a Good Samaritan Law designed to protect someone who renders aid in an emergency from undue liability during good faith rescue attempts. Yes, we know this story ... but it doesn't hurt to take a fresh look at it again. There are always things we can learn (or re-learn) each time we read the Scriptures.

We are told an expert in the law stood to test Jesus. *"Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* Now, most have traditionally understood this question to be, *"What do I have to do to get to heaven when I die?"* But not everyone thinks so, including me. We've talked about this before, but the Greek term translated "eternal" can have other nuances to it that don't necessarily apply to time, such as fullness, richness, never-ending (*as in overflowing and/or perpetual*) abundance ... these are *qualitative* as opposed to *quantitative* nuances. Think of a moment or a time in your life that was just so full, so rich, that you never wanted it to end ... like when you're with someone you love, you have little if any sense of the passage of time; you have in the fullest sense of the phrase "a good time." That *could* be the nuance of this man's use of the term "eternal." Also, the word translated "life" here is not the Greek word "bios" (βίος), which means physical life, but the Greek term "zoe" (ζωή) which, again, implies more of a *quality* of life. In English, we talk about *living*, as in breathing, heart-beating, biological life. And we talk about *living*, as in *living it up* ... implying a vigorous fullness and/or enjoyment ... a zestful life, a life that is full to the hilt. Where we use the same word "live" to mean two relatively different things, the Greeks used two different words ... again, "bios" is the heart-beating, breathing, biological life, and "zoe" is the living-it-up, zestful quality of life. Somebody can be "bios" alive, but "zoe" dead; in the current vernacular, that's someone who needs to "get a life." As Frederic Buechner succinctly and inimitably expressed it, *"We think of eternal life as what happens when life ends. We would do better to think of it as what happens when life begins."*

When this expert in the law stood before Jesus he was asking, *"What must I do to inherit (or acquire) eternal ZOEY?"* I think he's asking: *"Jesus, what do I have to do to get or acquire a good and full life? What is it that I have to do to get my life right?"* Many of us are here before Jesus each Sunday morning for the same reason this man is before Jesus in this text. We are here because we want to get our lives right. We want our lives to be full; full of zest, full of purpose, full of significance and honoring to God.

Jesus' response is to say, *"Well, you're a lawyer. What is written in the Law? How do you read it? How do you understand it?"* The man thinks for a moment and responds, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind. And love your neighbor as yourself."* *"Right!"* Jesus says. *"Do this, and you will live!"* This is a good answer, and Jesus affirms it! He's not giving a sardonic reply to a testy lawyer; He's giving an enthusiastic reply of affirmation to a man who apparently got it right! Jesus' reply, *"Do this and you will live!"* also uses the Greek root "zoe" (ζωή), and could be translated, *"Keep on doing this, and you will come alive! You'll find life to be fuller, more abundant and delightful as you keep on loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself."*

The text continues, *"But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'"* This has often been (mis)understood as the response of a self-righteous man trying to "justify himself" in the eyes of others; however, I don't think so. That may be reading a bit of our cultural biases into the text. In its simplest terms, to "justify" means to *get* or *put* something right, to get something "lined up" right, just as you would justify the margin on a Word document. When you justify a document on the

computer, you are trying to get everything lined up and neat and “right” as it can be. “He wanted to justify himself” *could* mean that this man really wanted to get his life lined up right; he really wants to know how to straighten out his life. And he keeps pressing Jesus for answers on how to do so, and that’s commendable! Try reading this as, “*Trying to get his life just right, he asked, ‘And who is my neighbor?’*”

It is in response to that specific question that Jesus begins to tell this story. That means the point of this familiar parable is not to tell us that if we love God we must also love the neighbor. The lawyer already knew that. In fact, he was the one who told Jesus that! It’s not even the point of this familiar parable to judge those of us who have walked past and/or ignored those in need. There are other passages in the Bible that judge us for that. The main point of the parable is to address the man’s question, “*And who is my neighbor?’*”

You know the story. A man left Jerusalem, walking toward Jericho, a seventeen mile hike in a desolate desert wilderness. Along the way he fell into the hands of robbers who beat him, robbed him and left him half dead. The first person to walk by after this incident was a priest, who saw the victim, passed by on the other side, and kept going. The next person to come by was a Levite, who also saw him, also passed by and kept walking. We don’t know why they walked by this man who was clearly in need; some think it’s possible that the priest and the Levite looked over at that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around. Or maybe they thought the man on the ground was faking, acting like he had been robbed and hurt in order to lure them for quick and easy mugging, which is not all that uncommon a ruse for thugs. Maybe they are thinking, “*If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’*” We really don’t know why they walked by ... maybe they were just being jerks, which is the most common interpretation. However, we don’t know and it’s as if Jesus is telling us, “*Don’t look for the moral of the story there. Keep going.*” Next comes a Samaritan. When he sees this victim in dire need of mercy, he takes care of him at considerable cost and inconvenience to himself. Then Jesus looks at the lawyer and asks, “*Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?’*” Notice the critical twist, here. The lawyer’s question, “*Who is my neighbor?’*” has been changed, as Jesus now asks, “*Who was a neighbor to this man?’*”

Like all good teachers, Jesus is constantly trying to get people to ask the right questions. Do you want to learn how to get a good and full life? Do you want to get your life right? Well, begin by asking the right questions! Our question shouldn’t be, “*Who is my neighbor?’*” but “*To whom shall I be a neighbor?’*” In the end, it is not really about who our neighbors are; it’s about who we are. As someone put it, “*If you want to make a difference, you have to BE different.*” You learn and practice what it means to be a neighbor yourself!

So, to ask the question as Jesus reframed it, “*To whom shall I be a neighbor?’*” As we are nearly out of time, the short answer is, “*Anyone God brings across your path who is in need of mercy.*” To be a neighbor is to look with the eyes of grace and mercy upon **all** whom God brings your way. Now, that’s a lot of people! In fact, that’s just about *everyone* God brings your way. The great seventeenth century theologian Jeremy Taylor used to counsel aspiring ministers to “*Speak kindly to everyone you meet, for everyone has a problem.*” Everyone has been or is being beat up by some “robbers” in life; all of us have our battles. The great twentieth century theologian ... Ann Landers ... wrote basically the same thing. She wrote, “*Be kind to people. The world needs kindness so much. You never know what sort of battles other people are fighting. Often just a soft word or a warm compliment can be immensely supportive. You can do a great deal of good by just being considerate, by extending a little friendship, going out of your way to do just one nice thing, or saying one good word.*” We come across people every single day who are being beat up by the “robbers” and vicissitudes of this life. Be a neighbor to them, a neighbor who displays mercy and offers a graceful hand or a caring word of help.

You want to get your life right? Do you want a life so full you just don’t want it to ever end? Then love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind. And then go on to love your neighbor as you love yourself. Do this, Jesus affirms, and you will come alive! And in doing so, you become the very hands and feet and voice of Jesus Christ reaching out in love and compassion for all people in need of mercy whom God brings your way.

Be a neighbor ... if for no other reason than there once was a time Jesus stopped and showed mercy to you.