

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost; July 31, 2022

+ Luke 10:25-37 +

“The Right Answer is in You”

Just then, an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus, saying, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“What is written in the law?” he asked him. “What do you read there?”

He replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and, love your neighbor as yourself.”

He said to him, “You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live.”

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He fell among robbers who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. It just so happened that a priest was going down that way. But when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. In the same way, a Levite also happened to go there, but when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. A Samaritan, as he traveled, came to where the man was. When he saw him, he felt sorry for the man. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. He put him on his own animal, took him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day, when he left, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper and said, ‘Take care of him. Whatever extra you spend, I will repay you when I return.’ Which of these three do you think acted like a neighbor to the man who fell among robbers?”

“The one who showed mercy to him,” he replied.

Then Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

That Samaritan. What a good guy, right? Everyone knows that the Samaritan is good. He’s so good we name laws after him that compel people to show compassion to someone in immediate danger. He’s so good that he earns points for his entire race, by association. If we play word association and you say, “Samaritan,” the first word out of my mouth will be: “Good!” What a good guy! Here! Let me show you: In my handy EHV Bible, the heading of the story says, “The Good Samaritan.” In my old NIV Bible, the heading says, “The Parable of the Good Samaritan.” (That’s presumptuous; Luke doesn’t call the story a parable, and it may be an actual historical event.)

So, yeah, he’s good. Interestingly, though, the man who tells the story (parable?) of the Good Samaritan never calls him “good.” Because the reason Jesus tells the story of the Samaritan is not to exalt the Samaritan. The purpose of the story is to humble. To crush, really.

There is a man who needs to be humbled. Crushed, really. **Just then, an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus, saying, “Teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?”** He is operating under the assumption that there is level of goodness beneath perfection that God will accept and allow him into heaven. Most people make this same assumption. Although it makes no sense at all to believe a perfectly holy God would accept anything other than perfection in his presence ever – let alone for eternity – most humans think he will. They don’t need to be perfect, just good. Problem is, in his Word God supplies us with no standard of goodness to inherit eternal life other than perfection. You have to be perfect.

And this is the truth toward which Jesus now turns this expert: You gotta be perfect, nothing less: **“What is written in the law?” [Jesus] asked him. “What do you read there?” He replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and, love your neighbor as yourself.”** The expert has correctly summarized God’s moral law. The first three Commandments tell us what we owe to God: All our heart, soul, strength, and mind. The last seven Commandments tell us what we owe our neighbor: love as we love ourselves.

Now, Jesus says, that’s it. That’s all you gotta do. Just give God everything you owe him perfectly, and your neighbor perfect love, and you’re in: **He answered him, “You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live.”** But, of course, he hasn’t. No one has. No one can. He was conceived in sin, and so were we. There is no chance, no hope of giving God everything you owe him all the time and giving your neighbor perfect love all the time.

But does the expert give up on saving himself? Does he see he can’t do it? Will he understand that if he’s going to live forever he needs to look to the Lord to give him the perfection he needs? No, sirs and ma’ams. He’s not about to give up that easily! **But he wanted to justify himself...** He’s still determined to get there on his own. He’s not ever going to be perfect on his own, but certainly he can be good enough for God to accept him: **...so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”** We need some guidelines, here, Jesus. We need some limits. Of course I can’t be perfect, but if you’ll just let me draw a few lines here and there in God’s commands, then I can be good enough. So, let’s have some guidelines, Jesus. Let’s make just a few exceptions, then I can be good enough.

And that’s when Jesus tells the story (maybe parable) of the Samaritan whom Jesus never calls good. Because the purpose isn’t to hold up the Samaritan, the purpose is to put down the expert who wants to save himself, to show him: no exceptions to the rules. When God says to love your neighbor as yourself, there are no exceptions. The right answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” is “Everyone. Always. No exceptions.”

In our country, we enjoy the luxury of traveling from place to place quickly and safely. I know some snide comments could be made about DC traffic and crime rates, but really, in the big picture of history, our travel is so easy and so safe. It was not that way for people traveling in Israel during Jesus’ ministry. Most people walked up and down steep terrain without cellphones to call for help if they sprained an ankle. And they walked paths full of robbers. The route from Jerusalem to Jericho was infamous for its dangerous terrain and plentiful hiding spots for robbers. What happens in Jesus’ story happened all the time.

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He fell among robbers who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.” But never fear! Because here comes a man of God, a man of the cloth, so now this poor man will be rescued for sure. **“It just so happened that a priest was going down that way. But when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.”** Not only does the holy man not help, he crosses to the other side to avoid any possibility of catching cooties. Clearly, his answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” is “Not everyone.” He draws lines on God’s laws, guidelines and limits. So does the next man of God: **“In the same way, a Levite also happened to go there, but when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.”** How does this Levite man of God answer the question, “Who is my neighbor?” “Not that guy.”

And what about you and me? How do we answer that question? Just who is my neighbor? Who is yours? Recently I have been corresponding with an Army medic who is about to finish her fourth tour in the

Middle East. For security reasons, she can't tell me a lot about where she is what she does. But once I asked her, "What's the hardest part of what you do?" After a while she answered, "Sometimes I have to save people who just got done shooting at me."

We all have people who take shots at us, figuratively at least. People who make us want to draw some lines on God's law to love our neighbor as ourselves, people who make us want to answer the question, "Who is my neighbor?" with "Not that guy."

But that's not even what's happening in this story. This poor victim never did a thing to the priest or the Levite. He was just somebody. A stranger, yes. But a human in trouble. Even there they drew lines and said, "Not that guy." And we do, too. It's not just our enemies we treat coldly. Sometimes it's just a stranger who needs help. For goodness' sake, sometimes it's my own friends who I can't be bothered with! My immediate family members! We don't just make some exceptions occasionally to loving our neighbors as ourselves, we do it often to all kinds of people.

So let's at least avoid this mistake. Let's not even try to do what the expert did. Let's even try to justify ourselves. Let's not even ask the question, "**What must I do to inherit eternal life?**" Forget it. No limits, no exceptions are allowed to God's law. Perfection is required. And we don't, we can't, reach it.

And now for the rest of the story. As you listen to rest of this story, ask yourself, "Does this Samaritan fellow remind me of anyone else I know?" **A Samaritan, as he traveled, came to where the man was. When he saw him, he felt sorry for the man. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. He put him on his own animal, took him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day, he took out two denarii [roughly \$300, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him. Whatever extra you spend, I will repay you when I return.'"**

How does this Samaritan answer the question, "Who is my neighbor?" His answer is, "Everyone." That must be his answer, because he stops to help a man who is not his family and not his friend. He should, in fact, count him as an enemy, because Jews and Samaritans normally dislike each other strongly. But when the Samaritan sees him, he feels sorry for him and helps him. He shows him the same level of love he would want for himself in that situation: personal, tender care; a ride; extended care paid for with money out of his own pocket, with a promise to pay more.

Does that remind you of anyone else you know? How about the one who is telling the story? Jesus answers the question, "Who is my neighbor?" with "Everyone." He sees sinful people in trouble, people who by nature are dead in sin and enemies of God, and he feels for them. And he helps them, spiritually dead enemies of God though they are. He helps them who so often fail to help each other. He is our perfect Neighbor.

He comes down from heaven to help us. While he is here, he is a perfect neighbor to everyone. He is even being a perfect neighbor as he tells this story to the expert. He loves him and wants him to look in the right place for eternal life. He is the perfect neighbor to his disciples, to his enemies, to his friends, to his family, to those who take shots at him, to those who want him dead. He lives as a perfect neighbor in our place, because we have not.

And then he lays it down, to take the wrath of God that we deserved for drawing lines and limits with God's command to love our neighbor as ourself. He takes the punishment we deserved. And he does it for everyone. Jesus loves every human being so much that he did this rescuing for all of us, for all the

people in this world, past, present, and future. Jesus answers, "Who is my neighbor?" with "Everyone." And he saves the world. He is the perfect neighbor to everyone.

He is our perfect, saving Neighbor who now asks, **"Which of these three do you think acted like a neighbor to the one who fell among the robbers?"** **"The one who showed mercy to him,"** he replied. **Then Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."** To someone like the expert who wants to save himself, Jesus' closing command is terrifying. **"Go and do likewise."** How? I have no power in me to answer the question, "Who is my neighbor?" the right way. Left to my own devices, I cannot and will not go and do likewise, like the Samaritan, like Jesus our Savior.

But you and I know that Jesus is the perfect, saving Neighbor to us and to all people in this world. And by faith, Jesus, who answers that question the right way, lives in your heart and mine. We have both the love and power of Christ living in us. And so the right answer is in us. And so is the power to go and do likewise. We turn to Jesus for forgiveness for our past failures, and we know we have it. And now we go forward, with him in our hearts.

Whoever we see – friend or enemy; wherever we see them – at home or on the road; whenever we see them – a time convenient or annoying; whatever they need – and even the extra mile. This is the love of the Samaritan, and more importantly, the love of our Savior Jesus for us.

We have his salvation. We have him in our hearts. So we have the right answer to the question. It's in us. Now, we go and do likewise. Amen.