

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost; September 3, 2023

+ Luke 10:23-37 +

“Jesus Is Your Neighbor; Be a Neighbor, Too”

Turning to the disciples, he said privately, **“Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! Indeed, I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see the things that you are seeing, yet did not see them, and to hear the things that you are hearing, yet did not hear them.”**

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 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 the robbers?”**

“The one who had mercy on him,” he replied.

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

During this church year, we are using a series of lessons called The Historic Lectionary. These lessons were developed early on in the Christian Church and used throughout most of the Western Church for most of its history. But now there are lots of lectionaries out there, and the Historic Lectionary is rarely used in Protestant churches.

Mostly because I’ve never used it before, I decided to use it this year. The Historic Lectionary has forced me to preach on texts that I never would have otherwise. It has also forced me – and this is what I’m thankful for today – to look at familiar texts in a new way.

And that includes today’s Gospel. Every Christian has heard the story of The Good Samaritan, probably many times. And I have preached on it five times at least. But the formers of the Historic Lectionary did something strange that forced me to look at it a different way: they included two verses that no other lectionary does. The first two verses: **Turning to the disciples, he said privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! Indeed, I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see the things that you are seeing, yet did not see them, and to hear the things that you are hearing, yet did not hear them.”**

Those two verses seem to fit better with the story before the Good Samaritan. All the other lectionaries include it with the previous story. But the early fathers saw it as belonging to the Jesus' best-known story. And it makes you think: what do those verses have to do with the Good Samaritan?

There is an expert in the law – and when we call these men “experts,” we should understand their expertise. They knew the content of the Old Testament thoroughly. In that they were experts. But they did not know how to apply it properly. They were like a man who memorizes a cookbook but has no ingredients to cook. They knew the words of the Old Testament, but did not see Jesus as the Messiah.

This expert in the law shows that he knows the words but misses their significance. He does not look to the Messiah for salvation, but to himself. **Just then, an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus, saying, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”** Jesus tells the man the truth. If you want to do something to inherit eternal life, you must keep God's commandments. **“What is written in the law?” [Jesus] asked him. “What do you read there?”**

Now the expert proves he knows the words: **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.” [Jesus] said to him, “You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live.”**

Uh oh. All your heart; all your soul; all your strength; all your mind. Do this, and you will live. Who can do this? Who has done this? No one. But the expert in the law is not ready to admit that he has failed to keep God's law perfectly. He shies away from claiming that he has loved God with everything he has and everything he is. But maybe he can get into heaven off that last part about loving your neighbor as yourself. So that's what he targets: **But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”** To “justify,” in Bible-speak, means to declare righteous. The man wants to make himself righteous in God's eyes and inherit eternal life by his works. And he thinks he still can. As long we have some guidelines on this whole “love your neighbor as yourself” commandment. Guidelines, Jesus! We need limits and parameters on who these neighbors are that we must love as ourselves.

Jesus could answer his question with one word. But instead, he tells a story.

Two holy men – much like that expert in the law – pass by a beaten, robbed, stripped man. And they do not just pass him by, but they cut a wide berth. But then comes a Samaritan, traveling the same perilous path from Jerusalem down to Jericho. Jews and Samaritans do not typically love, or even like, each other. It is easy to imagine that while in Jerusalem the Samaritan suffered insults and mistreatment, or at least general shunning, from the largely Jewish population. But he does not insult or shun the beaten man. Instead, he loves him as he loves himself.

If he were beaten and left for dead, the Samaritan surely would want to be loved, and so loves the beaten man. Not only does he care for him, but he cares for him thoroughly, kindly, and expensively. The answer to question, “Who is my neighbor?” is “Everybody. No matter who. No matter where. No matter when. No matter how much.” **“Which of these three do you think acted like a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” “The one who showed mercy to him,” he replied. Then Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”**

The Good Samaritan is probably Jesus' best-known story, challenged only the Prodigal Son. What is not so well know is the conversation with the expert in the law that surrounds it. Jesus tells this parable with two purposes. One is to teach the answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” Your neighbor is everyone;

no matter who, when, where, or how expensive. So, what have you done with Jesus' command to go and do like the Samaritan? Have you loved all people with the same love you show yourself, cared for them with the same care you give yourself?

Of course, we have not. Not always, anyway. And that is Jesus' second point of the parable: to show the expert in the law, and anyone else who wants to justify him or herself before God, that it cannot work for you. You have not loved God with everyone you are and everything you have, and you have not perfectly loved your neighbor as yourself.

And that leaves us needing help ourselves. And here's why I love having those first two verses included in this Gospel: **Turning to the disciples, he said to them privately, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! Indeed, I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see the things that you are seeing, yet did not see them, and to hear the things that you are hearing, yet did not hear them."** What were the disciples seeing and hearing that prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, kings like David and Solomon, wanted to but could not? That is the story of Jesus sending out seventy-two missionaries with many instructions, including these: **"Heal the sick who are in the town and tell them, 'The kingdom of God has come near you.'"** Jesus sends out seventy-two to heal the sick – just like the Samaritan – and to tell them that God's kingdom has come to them.

Jesus practices what he preaches. To the people who were down in those villages he sends physical healing with his missionaries. And to the entire human race that was down in the sin of incomplete and imperfect love for each other, to every sinner without hope of inheriting eternal life and being justified, Jesus brings the kingdom of God. He is our perfect neighbor, who sees us suffering in sin and about to die for eternity, and comes to heal us. With his perfect life of love, with eternal love that leads him to stretch out his arms and be nailed to cross, Jesus earns eternal life for us and justifies us – makes us holy before God.

Jesus is our perfect neighbor. He saves us – our bodies and our souls – by justifying us with his holy life and death, and giving us the inheritance of eternal life.

There are many people in our world who are down. You don't need me to tell you that. But right now, it seems more people are down in more ways than usual. Six in ten Americans live paycheck to paycheck, with an average credit card balance of almost seven thousand dollars. Homelessness rises while life expectancy drops. One in every eleven adults is now alcohol dependent or full-blown alcoholic. Students are struggling, farther behind in their education than ever. Your neighbor is everyone, every time, every way, every cost.

Of course, we are not Jesus. Of course, we cannot help everyone who needs it. Of course, our resources are limited. But wherever and whenever and however you can, to everyone you pass by who needs it, be a neighbor in whatever way you can.

Love your neighbor as yourself. And just how are we to love ourselves? You hear a lot about self-love and self-care, most it based on vagaries. Why does a Christian love himself? Because God loves him. You and I are eternally valuable, worthy of love from ourselves, because God has made us his children. We love ourselves because God loves us.

That is also why we love each other. Each person you see is one that Jesus has been a neighbor to. Each one is someone Jesus lived, died, and rose for, to give them life forever and justification. Love them for the same reason you love yourself: God loves them. Be a loving neighbor to them as Jesus has been to

you. Go and do likewise, like the Samaritan and Jesus. More importantly, go and do likewise because of Jesus. Amen.