

“And who is my neighbor?”

Psalm 82 and Luke 10:25-37

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Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Just to put the story you are about to hear into context, Jesus is now on his way to Jerusalem. The Galilean phase of his ministry is over. So, this is what he has come to do.

The optimism, the big crowds, the happy feelings – these are mostly in the rearview mirror.

Jesus’ mission is now becoming clear, the price that will be paid is becoming obvious (not to all, but to some), the teaching has a harder edge to it, and the crowds are noticeably smaller.

Everyone likes to be part of something new and exciting, but when the real work begins, that’s when you find out who is committed and who is not.

At the beginning of chapter 10, which is where we find our story for today, Jesus sends out the 70 on a mission trip. This is not a youth group retreat where everyone stays in a fancy retreat center and has nice meals and inspiring speakers. This is hard work. No change of clothes, no sandals, just “heal the sick” and say “the kingdom of God has come near to you.”

And don’t be surprised, Jesus tells them, if they close the door in your face.

In spite of the difficulty of the trip, the 70 returned with lots of stories to tell, and even Jesus seemed pleased by what he heard and genuinely excited with what they learned about doing God’s work in the world.

So, that’s where our story for today begins. The stakes are high. The work is serious. Every word that is spoken now carries a great weight.

²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ [Jesus] said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” ²⁷ He answered, “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.” ²⁸ And [Jesus] said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when

he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ ³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

There are these stories in scripture that we come to with our guard up. We hear these stories read, and we seem to know that we are not going to like the interpretation.

Right now you are probably thinking that you will not like what I have to say to you. It’s as though you know what’s coming. This is going to be one of those sermons that cannot end well. Doug is going to tell us to open our homes to Syrian refugees.

A few years ago, I was back in Michigan – the state in the U.S. where I am from – and I was visiting my parents, and while visiting them I had a very difficult conversation with my father. We had several difficult conversations over the years, and this was one of them. And it did not go well.

And then, on Sunday, I went to church, because when I’m on vacation, I like to go to church. I like to sit in the back and not have any responsibilities. I just want to hear a good sermon.

So, I opened up the worship bulletin for that Sunday, and – you are not going to believe this, but this is true story – the scripture reading for the day was **“honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that I am giving you.”**

And I remember thinking, **“This is not going to be good. I already feel terrible, and now this preacher is going to beat me up, and I will feel even worse than I do now.”**

Early in my ministry – it may have been my first year after seminary – Susan and I were struggling financially, we had nothing, orange crates for furniture, a typical story in some ways, and we weren’t quite at the tithing level in our giving. We were working toward it, but we weren’t there.

And then the sermon for the day – I will never forget this – the sermon for the day was about giving. It was stewardship season at that church, and Fred was a powerful and persuasive preacher, I still love him dearly, and in his sermon he said, **“You know, the Old Testament standard was the tithe. Ten percent off the top. First fruits. But now,”** he said, **“the standard is different. In the New Testament, Jesus requires everything. He demands your life.”**

And I remember thinking, **“No. I can’t even measure up to the Old Testament, and now this!”**

So, if you are worried about the sermon for today, and where I plan to go with this, and how I am sure to make you feel uncomfortable, I understand. I have spent time where you are sitting.

Please stay with me. Let's sort this out together.

Not long after that mission trip, involving 70 of Jesus's followers, the story tells us that a lawyer **“stood up to test Jesus”** and asked him, **“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”**

Okay, first of all, it would be so much fun to pretend that this lawyer was like the lawyers we know today. I don't know exactly how lawyers are regarded in Switzerland, but in the U.S. lawyers have one of the least respected professions.

Doctors, military officers, and fire fighters are always in the top five. Unfortunately, Christian pastors don't often make the top ten anymore, but they don't rank at the very bottom either. Lawyers always rank at or close to the bottom of the list.

And everyone I know has at least one lawyer joke, which portrays lawyers as mean and cruel and selfish. A man once said to a lawyer, **“If I pay you 100 U.S. dollars, will you answer two questions for me.” And the lawyer said, “Yes, what's the second question.”** [Thank you...I have more where that came from.]

But the lawyer in the story we heard today is different. In the first century lawyers were trained in the religious law. I don't think Jesus or anyone else would have been immediately suspicious of this person or his question. Jesus certainly challenged the religious establishment, no doubt about that, but Jesus never challenged the Law itself or its teachers.

He said, **“I came to fulfill the law, not to abolish it.”**

So, if anything, Jesus seemed to be better at legal debate than anyone else. He was not opposed to these conversations. He relished them. He was remarkably good at them.

The conversation here, as a matter of fact, seems respectful and civil. Yes, the lawyer meant to *test* Jesus, but there is no suggestion – and I think this is important for us to see – there is no suggestion anywhere that this exchange is anything more than what it appears to be – namely, a teaching moment in Jesus' ministry.

What is far more interesting, I think, is that little word “do” – as in **“what must I *do* to inherit eternal life?”** As most of us know, the very heart of the good news is that there is nothing we can do. Eternal life is a gift – it's free and it's unearned.

Interestingly, Jesus lets that go. I would have brought it up, of course, had I been in Jesus' shoes, because I am trained to make that point all day long. But Jesus is very, very shrewd in these conversations, and so he plays along. Jesus asks the lawyer what the Law says. The biggest “to do” list in the world probably has something to say about this.

And the lawyer – to his credit – goes immediately to Deuteronomy 6:5 ... **“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might...and your neighbor as yourself.”**

To this Jesus says, **“Absolutely right! Do this and you will live.”**

I can't resist pointing out what Jesus is doing here. He is not denying grace because, after all, who can do that perfectly? Who can love God and neighbor perfectly? Don't we all fail at that – over and over again?

And the lawyer seems to sense this, and he begins to look for a loophole. And this of course is what we pay lawyers to do – to help us find a way out. I didn't steal that money; it just appeared in my bank account. I didn't kill that person; he happened to fall on my knife which happened to be in my hand.

So, the lawyer in this story asks for a definition of **“neighbor.”** If we define the word narrowly enough, maybe we can still love our neighbor perfectly and meet the requirements of the law.

So, Jesus said, **“A man was going down to Jerusalem.”** Some guy. No name. We don't know who he was. Nor does it matter to the story. He was on the old Jericho road. Not a place anyone should travel alone. It was dangerous. Thieves and robbers were always around. And what do you know? This man was attacked ... and left for dead. Half naked. Bleeding. Money gone.

The first person to see the man lying there, helpless, was – did you catch it? – a priest. Oh good. Help is on its way. But no, the priest keeps his distance and goes to the other side of the road, so as not to come into contact with the injured man. To be fair, the priest had certain purification requirements, so being in contact with this poor soul was out of the question.

But wait. Another person is coming along. He's a ... Levite. Not a priest, but a religious worker. Certainly he will help. But no. He too goes to the opposite side of the road. He doesn't even feel for a pulse. He just keeps walking. Best not to get involved in these things. Who knows what could happen? The man might be carrying a disease.

By then a third person came into view.

There's a great deal of traffic on this particular day, isn't there? And that turns out to be good news for the person lying in his own blood by the side of the road. This third person – it's painful to say this word, the lawyer can't even bring himself to say the word aloud at the end of the story – did you hear that? – the third person to come along is a Samaritan.

He was **“moved with pity,”** the story says. No pity at all in the other two men, but here is an emotional response to the pain of another human being.

And so, he went to the man. He washed and bandaged the wounds. He put the man on his own animal and walked alongside until they came to an inn, where the Samaritan cared for the injured man. When the Samaritan left the next day, he gave the innkeeper two denarii along with a promise to pay more if more was required.

A denarius, you may recall, was roughly equal to a day's pay – not a fortune, certainly, but not a small sum either.

At that moment, as I imagine it, the crowd listening to this fascinating conversation between Jesus and the lawyer would have been very quiet. Occasionally, this room becomes very quiet too. And when it does, I know that you are listening. I don't always know if you are agreeing with what I am saying, but I know that you are listening. And the crowd that day was listening, and they were listening intently.

And Jesus said to the lawyer, **“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”**

As I mentioned, the lawyer could not bring himself to say the word **“Samaritan”** aloud, so the lawyer said, **“The one who showed him mercy.”**

So powerful. But also disturbing. Isn't it?

Instead of answering the question, **“Who is my neighbor?”** Jesus says, **“Be a neighbor.”**

Be a compassionate neighbor to those in need. This is not about identifying those around us who might have a need, which is probably what you thought I would do with the sermon for today, what you might have worried that I would do.

Jesus focused his attention back on the lawyer, and in effect Jesus said, **“You, you well-educated person, you self-confident person, you who dared to stand and ask me this question, you need to think of yourself as a neighbor, you need to open your heart to the people with whom you come into contact.”**

A number of years ago, a famous experiment was conducted on a seminary campus. It so happens that this experiment took place on the campus of the seminary where I attended – a few years before I was a student there.

What happened was that researchers gathered some students in a classroom and told them that they wanted to film them talking about the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The problem was that the recording studio was on the far side of the campus, and because of a tight recording schedule they would all need to hurry over.

The students didn't know this, but the researchers had hired an actor to play the part of a man in distress. He was lying next to the path that the students would be taking. He was coughing, moaning, and in considerable distress.

What would happen, the researchers wondered, when these students, who were preparing for ministry, actually encountered someone in need?

The story, as you might have guessed, does not end well. Almost all of the students rushed past the hurting man. One student even stepped over the body on his way to the recording studio where he planned to teach about the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

The temptation, of course, is to be critical of these students – or of the seminary they attended – and a great deal has been written about this little study, none of it very flattering – but the truth of the matter is, putting the truth of this parable into practice, actually being a neighbor, thinking of ourselves as neighbors to the whole world, that is exceedingly hard to do, especially for busy and important people such as ourselves.

To become a neighbor, which is what Jesus is asking us to do, when he says, **“Go and do likewise,”** to actually go and do likewise, requires a change of heart. I think we know what we need to do. I think we get it intellectually.

The challenge in the first century – and the challenge in the twenty-first century – is to have a changed heart.

After two and a half years, I know many of you quite well. Many of us at IPC know our Bibles quite well. It’s astonishing to me sometimes, when I hear you talking about the Bible. Many of you can cite chapter and verse. I know my Bible pretty well too, but I did not grow up in one of those churches where it was important to cite a chapter and a verse. “As Paul says in Romans 5:25!”

I don’t do that very well, but I know many of you who do.

And as I said, I am astonished when I hear it. I know many pastors who would love to have a congregation so well educated in the Bible.

But the lawyer in our story for today was well educated in scripture too. His problem was not an intellectual one. What Jesus recognized was that he needed changed heart.

Our world, as you know, is in considerable turmoil right now. Back in the country where I come from, there is considerable turmoil as well. Christian people are being challenged to respond.

I think we know what to do. Our problem is not an intellectual one. If a Facebook post or a Twitter response were all that was required from us, well, my eternal life would be secure. But Jesus isn’t looking for an intellectual response. He is looking for a changed heart, a heart that can respond with compassion and mercy and love.

And I suppose the point of the parable is that if a Samaritan can do it, why can’t we?