

Sunday, July 10, 2016 – 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer

Sermon Title: “And who is my neighbor?”

Scripture Reading: Luke 10:25-37

(The second reading for Sunday will be Psalm 82. We read more than one scripture reading because sometimes the two readings shed light on each other, and other times simply because it is good to hear scripture in worship. Take a look at Psalm 82 if you want to add a dose of realism to your prayer life. Do you ever offer prayers like that?)

Note: We return to the NT this week after a look last week at the OT story about Naaman, Syrian military commander. Our reading this week should be a familiar one to us. We call it the “Parable of the Good Samaritan,” but it probably should be called the “Parable of the good neighbor.”

1. Vs. 25 tells us that “a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.” It's important to know that this man was not a lawyer in the contemporary sense of that term. He was a religious man, trained not at a law school but in a seminary. He became a lawyer by learning how to argue cases involving God's rules for life, and in the first century A.D. these rules were exceedingly complex. What happened was that when you spend your life parsing rules, commands, statutes, and laws, you sooner or later conclude that the life of faith is all about doing certain things – and not doing other things. Doesn't the life of faith still feel that way?
2. Notice the first question the lawyer asks (vs. 25): “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” I can't help but notice the problem with that question. Can you see it? Let me put it this way: whoever said that there was something we could do to inherit eternal life? Isn't the good news of Jesus' teaching that there is NOTHING we can do? Isn't eternal life about God's grace, freely given, unearned, undeserved? Where does this question come from?
3. Jesus, however, doesn't give that response. He's a teacher, remember? So, he seizes the opportunity to teach something to his learned questioner. (You have to love these situations!) Jesus answers the question with another question (vs. 26): “What is written in the law?” And of course the lawyer correctly repeated Deuteronomy 6:5, so Jesus said, “Okay, then, that's what you've got to do.” But here's where the conversation begins to go badly for the lawyer. The lawyer asks (vs. 29), “And who is my neighbor?” And what is Jesus' answer? (Again, you've got to love what Jesus does in these situations.) Jesus' answer is in the form of a story or parable: “A man was going down from Jerusalem....” Now, before going any further, answer this question: Who is the person in the story we are supposed to admire? Not the man who was beaten and robbed. Jesus asks, “Who was the neighbor **to** the mugging victim?” Since the lawyer (vs. 29) was “seeking to justify himself,” Jesus tells him how to do it. Be like the person in the story who stopped, helped, gave of himself, and promised to return. The question for us is this: Are you a neighbor **to** others?
4. Susan and I once received a colorful print made by the Japanese Christian artist Sadao Watanabe. With Christians making up less than one percent of the population in Japan, Watanabe is in a definite minority! But he makes lovely art, and much of it depicts well-known Bible stories. (I discovered that my new neighbor, the pastor at the Methodist church, is also a collector of original Watanabe prints.) Our print, which hangs in our living room, depicts the “Parable of the Good Samaritan.” Here's the thing: the hero of this story was from one of the most detested groups of people in Israel. It is difficult to overstate how much Samaritans were hated. The Jews walked many, many kilometers to avoid setting foot in Samaritan territory. Think of people we detest today. Be honest. We all have groups of people we can't stand – frankly, people we would never want to be around. Now, imagine putting a painting or a print on the wall depicting a member of this group. Isn't that what Susan and I are doing when we hang that painting on our wall? When Jesus told this very proper, very Jewish, very pious man (vs. 37) to “go and do likewise,” wasn't he saying to go and be a Samaritan? My friend Scott Hoezee, who is a teacher of preachers and whom I have quoted before, puts it this way: “[Jesus is telling the learned lawyer] that what the gospel is all about is becoming what you once despised. It's becoming what you have never been and for a long time at least never even wanted to be. Coming from the lips of an incarnate Savior who let himself become human . . . well, such words gain a great poignancy.” Tell me, how do you interpret this parable?