

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
July 13-14, 2019
Luke 10:25-37

“Who Is My Neighbor?”

Jesus’ familiar parable in today’s Gospel lesson has filtered down into our common, everyday language. Frequently in the news, we hear reports of “Good Samaritans” – people who render aid and help to others in time of need. The person rendering the aid and the person receiving the aid are usually, but not always, complete strangers. When help is needed in an emergency you don’t really care who is giving that help, do you? There are “Good Samaritan Laws” in many places, including the Commonwealth of Virginia, which protect a person who “in good faith, renders emergency care or assistance, without compensation, to any ill or injured person at the scene of an accident, fire, or any life-threatening emergency, or en route therefrom to any hospital, medical clinic or doctor’s office, shall not be liable for any civil damages for acts or omissions resulting from the rendering of such care or assistance” (<http://www.w4ghs.org/goodsam00.vaoems.pdf>). Some of you may have acted as such a Good Samaritan in an emergency situation. Some of you may have received help from a Good Samaritan in an emergency situation. It all stems from the parable that is before us, and the question that prompted Jesus’ telling of the parable. It is that question that serves as the theme for today’s message: “Who Is My Neighbor?” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

Luke alone, of all four Gospel writers, records this parable of Jesus. It is at the same time beloved and convicting. Jesus in this parable challenges us to move beyond mere head knowledge and having the theologically correct answer in order to put love into action by serving our neighbor, who as Luther tells us, is Christ in our midst (https://www.azquotes.com/author/9142-Martin_Luther/tag/neighbor). God does not need our good works, Luther says, but our neighbor does (Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 10). The lawyer in the Gospel lesson asks two questions, the first of which is “**Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?**” (Luke 10:25). His intent was not motivated by goodness, but to entrap Jesus. The word here for “put him to the test” is the same root word used when Jesus was put to the test, or tempted, by the devil (Luke 4:2, *πειράζω*). That’s the first question, and Jesus throws it back at him by asking him what is written in the Torah, the Law. The lawyer immediately replies with the correct answer, citing Scripture that speaks both of loving God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and loving neighbor (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus commends him for his answer. But it doesn’t end here. The unholy intent that prompted the first question now leads to a second question: “**And who is my neighbor?**” The lawyer was expecting the correct answer to be a fellow member of the house of Israel; one of God’s chosen people. That’s who his neighbor was, right? Thus far, and no farther. His neighbor certainly would not include any unclean Gentile trash. Or would it? And so the stage is set for Jesus’ parable.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho is a downward descent that follows a twisty, turning road with large boulders – perfect for hiding and ambushing unsuspecting passers-by. People were frequently robbed along this very road. Ironically, the people we would think who would be the first to respond and give assistance to the injured man pass him by: the priest and the Levite, both of whom served in the temple. We’re not told why they refused to help. It could’ve been for many reasons – reasons that we still use: best not to get involved, I’m too busy, maybe it’s a trick, I don’t know anything about this person. The one person nobody would think would stop to help does: a Samaritan. We need to remember that Jews and Samaritans despised one another. And that’s what makes Jesus’ parable so striking. The despised Samaritan gets off his donkey, renders aid to the injured man, takes him to an inn, and pays for his care. He interrupted whatever he was doing to do all of this. Jesus’ words are not just to the lawyer in the parable, but to each one of us as well: “**You go, and do likewise**” (Luke 10:37). Our neighbor is not just

someone who looks like us or lives near us. Our neighbor is anyone in need of our help. Our neighbor is Christ in our midst.

The name of Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566) is probably not familiar to us. Actually, he was a contemporary of Luther (1483-1546), a Spanish Dominican friar, and one of the earliest Europeans to come to the New World. At the age of eight, the young “Las Casas watched Columbus make a proud parade through the streets of Seville on the return from his first voyage to the Indies. Bartolomé’s own father, a merchant, was part of Columbus’s second voyage to establish businesses there. And, in 1502 [1512?], at the age of twenty-eight [eighteen?] and before his ordination to the priesthood, the young Las Casas himself went to the New World, apparently as part of his father’s business interests... in 1513, after two years a priest, he became chaplain to the expedition that conquered Cuba” (*A Passion for Life: Fragments of the Face of God*, Joan Chittister. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996; p. 49). Las Casas became a first-hand observer of the genocide of the native peoples of the New World. “In his *History of the Indies*, Las Casas, years later, becomes very explicit about what he began to see... within two years after the arrival of Columbus, half of the 250,000 Indians on Haiti alone were dead, murdered, mutilated, or driven to suicide” (Ibid, pp. 49-50). “... the church itself questioned whether or not Indians were completely human or, in their obvious differences, not some sort of sub-species between animal life and humankind. Theologians of repute argued from Aristotle that some people were meant to be domesticated or enslaved for their own good” (Ibid, p. 50). Over against this, Las Casas held fast to the “notion that ‘all humanity is one,’ [and] he stood up to the most powerful elements of his society: to the church, to the court, and to the conquistadors” (Ibid, p. 50). “*Encomiendas* were tracts of land, plantations – in some cases entire villages – awarded to Spanish settlers by the Crown. Most important of all, however, is that the Indians who lived on the land were part of the package” (Ibid, p. 51). Las Casas himself was granted such an *encomienda*, but gave this up and set free the native peoples who were enslaved on it. Las Casas saw his neighbor as those who were not even regarded as human, and he became an advocate for them. “Las Casas... knew that he had an obligation to bring others to face the issue too. He began to preach against the policy publicly. He began to storm the royal court in Spain with complaints and petitions and recommendations for change in the *encomienda* system. He protested the use of war as a form of evangelization. He made trip after trip back to Europe to engage support for the Indian cause and deter new expeditions of conquest. He spoke and spoke and spoke. He wrote treatises and distributed them. He drew the wrath of churchmen and courtiers alike... Finally, after years without success, the world began to listen to this ‘Defender of the Indians’... Finally, in 1542, Charles V [the same Holy Roman emperor under whom Luther lived] promulgated the New Laws that outlawed the enslavement of Indians. Finally, others, both lay and cleric, began to support the notion of universal humanity and the implications of that for the national policies of Christian countries” (Ibid, p. 51).

In answering Jesus’ question, “Who is my neighbor?”, Las Casas modeled the love of Jesus to his generation. And we are to do the same in our generation. Doing so does not mean that people will necessarily thank us. In fact, the opposite may be true. But if we are doing something in order to be thanked, we are doing it for the wrong reason. Jesus became the Good Samaritan for you and me. He rescued us. He had compassion upon us. He poured his life blood – not mere oil and wine – upon our wounds when we had been attacked by the enemy who has come **“only to steal and kill and destroy”** (John 10:10). Jesus has come that we **“may have life and have it abundantly”** (John 10:10). The love of Jesus made known at the cross for you and me is costly, sacrificial, and all-inclusive. It is for all sin of all people in all places for all time. The love of Jesus has set us free to love and serve our neighbor, no longer asking who, but how. Not “Who is my neighbor?”, but “How can I serve my neighbor?” Amen.