

5th Sunday after Pentecost July 14 2019

Deuteronomy 30:9-14 Luke 10:25-37

You're travelling down one of the gravel roads around Ely and you come upon an accident. A serious one. The car lies in the ditch, obviously having flipped several times. There is a man lying on the road, having been flung from the car. The violence of the crash has ripped the clothes from his body. All you can tell from looking at him is he's middle aged, has a darker skin tone, and he's hurt.

What do you do?

Do you check their immigration status? Do you get their income level? Do you check their political affiliation? Do you check whether they are a foreigner or not? Whether they pay taxes or not? Do you see whether they are a Hawkeye or Cyclone fan? Whether they are even from Iowa or not? If they like beef or chicken?

Of course not! I know what you do because I've seen it in person and heard about it through conversation. You immediately stop and help. You call for the fire department to come and you render first aid to this human being who is in obvious need. Everybody knows that! Even folks who aren't Christians, right?

All those other things don't matter when someone is in need, do they? What's important is that a human being is in need of assistance.

Since that is so, what's the point of Jesus' story about the Merciful Samaritan? We tend to turn this parable into a simple morality tale... every state in the Union has a Good Samaritan law that offers some legal protection to those who, in good

faith, help others who have been injured. An encouragement for folks to stop and help. Which we all know we ought to do anyway, right?

But if everyone already knows this, I ask again, what's the point of the story?

The parable is prompted by a question from a religious lawyer to Jesus. Now, while in the past I have thought of this encounter as a combative one, if you look carefully at the story it becomes less so. Yes, it says that the lawyer stands to test Jesus, but the word used really means something like, debate. The lawyer practices religious law. He is less Matlock and more theologian. And what theologians do is debate...test... one another about questions of theology and religious law. In fact, his standing and addressing Jesus as Rabbi is a show of respect.

So, the lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus does what he does and responds with a two-part question, "What does scripture say?" and "How do you understand what that means?" Note the implications of that. Jesus acknowledges that there is what scripture says and what we understand it to mean.

The lawyer responds with an answer that Jesus gives in the gospels of Matthew and Mark; Deuteronomy 6 -the Shema of the Israelites- Love of God with all that you are, your whole being... and Leviticus 19- love of neighbor.

Jesus replies, "Yep, you got that right. Do that and you will live."

Then the lawyer drills down to the details with the follow up question, "Who is my neighbor?" Now, any good lawyer is not going to ask a question he doesn't already know the answer to. The answer, according to Leviticus, the Hebrew

Scriptures in general, and the Jewish understanding is that the neighbor are those in your tribe. In other words, your fellow Israelites.

Jesus responds to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” with this parable.

A couple of things to note about the story.

First, who are the characters in this parable? There are 5 (maybe 6)

The man who falls among robbers, the priest, the Levite, the Samaritan, and the Innkeeper. One of these things is not like the other. Which one?

The man who falls among robbers is the only character in the story who is not identified as belonging to some group. Instead, he is just an *anthropos*, a human being. The fact that he is stripped by the robbers means that those who come upon him have nothing with which to identify his class, religion, nationality, nothing. He could only be categorized as a human being in need.

Second, If I said Larry, Moe, and...what would you say next. Curly! Right. Now, when a Jew hears “A priest, a Levite and..” the next thing they expect to hear is “an Israelite”. Instead, they hear, “A Samaritan”. One author suggested that would be the equivalent of saying, “A doctor, a medic, and Osama Bin Ladin.” That’s the gut level reaction you would expect from the audience hearing this parable. Jews and Samaritans do not like each other, for example, James and John were willing to call down the fires of heaven on a Samaritan town just before this encounter with the lawyer when the town would not receive Jesus.

Third, look at Jesus' reframing of the question of the lawyer. "Which of these had become neighbor to the man?" The lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus asks, "Who has become neighbor?"

Fourth, the lawyer answers Jesus question (correctly, according to Jesus), "The one who showed him mercy." The word mercy is most closely associated with God's actions towards humans, especially those who are in covenant relationship with God. This is God who has compassion on humans and comes to their aid. This (mercy) is what is owed to neighbor (remember, the lawyer at the beginning of the story thought that neighbor was a fellow Israelite.)

Jesus, in his understanding of how we work, has the lawyer teach himself the lesson. Because the lawyer has admitted that his question about who is neighbor gets the concept of neighbor all wrong.

Neighbor is not determined through category (Israelite), but through action (one who shows mercy). The lawyer thought only in terms of categories. He saw people as priest, Levite, Samaritan, Innkeeper. Neighbor for him was someone who fit into a particular category, Israelite.

Now, he has admitted, especially in the face of the lack of action of the priest and Levite, that the one who was neighbor was the one who showed mercy to the injured man. Who drew near to the human being in need and helped.

And that's the brilliance of how Jesus tells the story. The man lying there half dead could be a fellow Jew, he could be another Samaritan, he could be rich, he could be poor. But we and those in the story don't know this. All we know is that this is a human being in need.

Jesus' point is, deep down, everyone of us knows that you help a human being in need. You don't wait until they meet certain criteria. Fit into a particular category. Instead, you do first aid, bandage their wounds with wine and oil (which costs the Samaritan because this is probably from what he was on the road to sell). You take the time to go out of your way and get them somewhere they can get further in-depth care and assistance until they recover (the innkeeper), and you come back and check on them. Everyone knows this.

But, as the lawyer demonstrates, we have this awful human tendency to put boundaries on our mercy. To define who receives it from us.

And this is the grace of Jesus, that he does not condemn the lawyer for his beliefs. Instead, he just gently points the lawyer in the right direction and lets him get there himself. A reminder, that mercy/compassion shown to one in need is what makes us neighbor. And that works both ways. My neighbor is the one who is in need to whose aid I come and neighbor is the one who sees my need and comes to my aid. In that act of mercy, we are all made neighbor to one another.

Neighbor is not in the definition, but in the doing. "Go and do likewise" Jesus says. Go! And give aid to all those human beings you see who are in need. Without prequalification. Without reserve.

In light of this parable, what then do we do given the Homeland Security Inspector General's report of conditions at detention centers at our Southern Border?

In light of this parable, what then do we do given that 9% of human beings in Linn County live below the poverty level, which means one in eight people struggle

with hunger, including one in seven children. And more than 25,000 individuals have been identified as living with not enough food to eat?

What do we do? An odd thing for a Lutheran preacher to ask, but the reality is that Jesus in the Gospel of Luke always points to disciple as an action word. It is a lived thing. Like neighbor it is defined by action, not category.

And the grace we have today is given to us in our reading from Deuteronomy, where Moses calls the people who are about to enter the promised land to renew the covenant God made with their ancestors. Through this covenant God gives life and asks for obedience. God's commandment is neither burdensome nor too far off, but dwells in the people's own hearts.

To use Moses' own word, "Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away....No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe."

This command of Jesus to go and do likewise, to give aid to human beings in need, is not too hard for you. No, the one who enables us to do this is very near. Jesus Christ, who showed us the way to care for our fellow human beings with a gut felt compassion... is the one who has claimed us in baptism, who has gifted us with the Holy Spirit that we might be empowered to "go and do likewise". Go and do that which we already know how to do. To show mercy to all those in need. To love one another with the same self-less agape love that Jesus has shown to us.

Strengthened by this Word of Jesus which is in our mouth and the Body and Blood of our savior which is in our heart. Let us go and do likewise.