

Sunday, September 20, 2015

Questions Jesus Asked: Which proved to be a neighbor?

Marysville UMC

Luke 10:25-37 CEB

Pastor Jenny Smith

Today, we'll read a portion of the text and then explore some application and repeat. May God speak to each of us in the way we most need today.

We're opening up to the book of Luke today. Luke and the Book of Acts were likely written by the same author. Probably an anonymous author who took the book of Mark, a sayings collection called the Q source, and another collection of material and wrote the book of Luke around 80-100 CE, after the birth of Christ. There's evidence that it was still being revised well into the 2nd century.

Luke 10:25 A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to gain eternal life?" 26 Jesus replied, "What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?" 27 He responded, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. 28 Jesus said to him, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live." 29 But the legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Let's focus on this legal expert first. In Jewish society there was no distinction between civil law and religious law. This lawyer was an expert in the Scriptures as well. Jesus had just made outrageously lofty claims about himself. Could he answer a simple question? "What must I do to gain eternal life?"

Jesus responds with a new question that was a challenge to the lawyer's honor, which was a really big deal in those days. "Well, you know the law, what do you think? "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, being, strength & mind.*" This text from Deuteronomy 6:4-9 was part of the Shema, repeated twice each day by faithful Jews. The legal expert would have known this well.

Knowing vs doing

The study of Torah (the law) was so important to the Pharisees that Rabbi Akiba, an important teacher of the Torah once said: "Study of the Law is of higher rank than practising it." In stark contrast, Jesus responds: "Do this, and you will live." Jesus didn't say, "think about it...memorize it...defend it...and you will live." True and real life is found not just in knowing the commandments but in doing them. "What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?"

This reminds me of the group of people who came into my office about 10 days ago and said, "we've got to **do** something for wildfire recovery efforts in Washington."

The point of *heart, soul, strength & mind* is to plant the flag of God's sovereignty over the whole of one's life. God's claim on us reaches to every area of our experience. No part of ourselves is to be withheld from God.

So it begs the question, **In what ways are we like the legal expert?** They know how it's been done before. When do we take on the role of reminding everyone how it's always been - we remind our kids, spouse, friends how they've always been - sometimes, we don't let people change - or maybe you've experienced someone doing this to you - you sense God calling you to some big or small changes in your life and the people closest to you don't understand - they love to remind you how it's always been which must equal how it's always going to be. Jesus wants to free us from being the legal expert.

Before we read the next section - this will be helpful. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous. It descended nearly 3,300 feet in 17 miles. It ran through narrow passes and the terrain offered easy hiding for the bandits who terrorized travelers.

30 Jesus replied, "A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He encountered thieves, who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death. 31 Now it just so happened that a priest was also going down the same road. When he saw the injured man, he crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. 32 Likewise, a Levite came by that spot, saw the injured man, and crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way.

This story is all about **boundaries**. First century Judaism was ordered by boundaries with specific rules regarding how Jews should treat Gentiles or Samaritans, how priests should relate to Israelites, how men should treat women, and so on. Since the boundaries allowed for certain groups to establish their positions, power and privilege, maintaining the boundaries was vital to social order. It was a religious duty. It doesn't make much sense to us today, but we can imagine how the priest and Levite not only walked right by, but actually crossed to the other side of the road to avoid the man in pain. However, if a priest on a journey found a corpse, he had a duty to bury it. Maybe he rushed by since the man was still alive, relieved he wasn't required to stop.

I struggle with what it means to help our brothers and sisters who stand on the side of the road and ask for help. My gut reaction is that my faith compels me to help. Then I participate in studies like, "When Helping Hurts." I learn about the cycle of poverty and how my resources would be more effective when given to our agencies who have an organized way to help people make the next step in their life. In Anchorage, it was illegal to give food or money to someone through our car window. We were allowed to pull over to a parking lot and give something. So I now do what I can to support agencies who are better equipped to help people make some real changes AND I follow the little nudge inside my soul that tells me to help someone in a practical way in the moment. It's not easy, but may we all continue to respond to the Gospel in the easy and difficult ways it presents.

33 A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. 34 The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, tending them with oil and wine. Then he placed the wounded man on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day, he took two full days' worth of wages and gave them to the innkeeper. He said, 'Take care of him, and when I return, I will pay you back for any additional costs.' 36 What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?" 37 Then the legal expert said, "The one who demonstrated mercy toward him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

By conventional storytelling, the audience can expect that in a series of three, the third character will break the pattern. Moreover, the expected sequence would be a priest, a Levite, and then an Israelite. Shattering all expectations, the third traveler is a Samaritan. By making the Samaritan the hero, Jesus challenged the longstanding hostility between Jews and Samaritans.

I'm slowly becoming an official Seahawks fan (show new jersey!). But the problem is - this is my husband's favorite team (picture of 49ers jerseys). I sense a little hostility in our home on Sundays lately. Well, except for last week when the 49ers won and the Seahawks lost.

But seriously, the bad feelings between the Samaritans and Israelites were very real. Samaritans were unclean people, descendants of the mixed marriages that followed from the Assyrian settlement of people from various regions in the fallen northern kingdom. **Jesus demolished all boundary expectations.** Social position - race, religion or region - count for nothing. And did you notice the

lawyer can't even bring himself to say the word, Samaritan. "The one who showed him mercy." He must have been shocked at Jesus' inclusion of a Samaritan.

Jesus demolished all boundaries between people. Imagine what would happen if we worked through what this meant in our refugee crisis? In our relationship to the homeless in our towns? To those who think, act or love differently than you do? This is where the rubber meets the road of our faith. Will the stories and beliefs of Jesus Christ create a change of heart in us? Or will we continue with business as usual because it's the path of least resistance? Your prayer today may be, "Show me a boundary inside myself that needs to come down."

If you ever want an image of compassion, this is a great text. Notice all the verbs in how the Samaritan cared for the man. *Went, bandaged, poured, put, brought, took care.* Sometimes I see an opportunity to be generous and compassionate, and the selfish part of me says, "no - no time - too much effort - put yourself first." **But the paradox of being a disciple in the kingdom of God is that the very things we think will drain our energy are often the things that give us life.**

This story ends with a great question. The first question by the lawyer was, "who is my neighbor?" The last question by Jesus is, "Which was a neighbor to these?"

The questions we ask shape the trajectory of our lives. We can go from, "Why is my kid so difficult?" to "how can I love my child today?" From "how can I get even when those who have wronged me?" to "How can I best serve the needs I see around me?" From "What do I want to hang onto?" to "What do I want to give myself to?"

The questions we ask ourselves create our life path. And **Jesus helps us ask better questions.** So if you're stuck in life right now, think about the questions you're asking. Maybe there's a better question to ask. And if it becomes a question you see reflected in the pages of Scripture and what you know about God, then I'm pretty sure it will lead to you experiencing new life and resurrection.

The right question changes everything.

Why do parables teach us so well? We see ourselves in story - we see what's possible - we see the worst of humanity. We want transformation, not information.

Who are you in this story right now?

Are we the lawyer who's trying to keep life the way it's always been? Or trying to one up Jesus and try life our own way?

Are we Jesus' audience who's looking for some clue as to how to live this Christian life? What should I do and not do?

Are we the priest or Levite who clearly sees a need and rationalizes why it's not our job to help?

Are we the lawyer, priest or Levite who would prefer to keep all the boundaries right where they are? It helps us to know who's in and who's out.

Are we the person hurt on the road who's screaming out for someone to notice, but everyone seems to be walking by?

Here's my prayer for us, the church this week. May the challenge and graceful call of this story take root in our hearts, minds and souls. May we see the opportunities to love someone different from us.

And may we take it. May we unlock the door of our life to let God in a little bit more...to the places we've kept off limits for years. Because when we realize a part of every character in this story is part of us, then we allow the grace of God to walk in and make itself at home in our heart and it changes everything. Amen.