

Luke 10:25-37 Like a Good Neighbor
July 10, 2022

It is the premise of the Christian faith that the most important ends in life are to love God with all the heart, soul, strength, and mind; and to love one's neighbor as oneself. This is our guiding principle.

Any conversation about right believing is going to end up a conversation about the right treatment of other people. There will be no prevarications, or equivocations. That means we won't be able to talk our way out of it. The insistence of biblical faith on moral action in relationships, broadly defined, cannot be escaped. It is not only to the harm of people both within the church and outside of it, but it is to the church's detriment when it is set aside.

All of the other doctrines; Creation, Incarnation, Virgin Birth, Trinity, Atonement, Forgiveness of Sin, the Resurrection of the Dead, the Return of Christ, they are all secondary to the Rule of Love, as are the rituals of the faith, mainly Baptism, and the Lord's Supper. It is significant that when Jesus was asked the crucial question about eternal life, they are not mentioned.

It is naive, and perhaps a little arrogant, at least shortsighted, to believe that if Jesus did not mention the aforementioned doctrines and rituals, that we should correct his negligence, and make them our focus. Instead, Jesus told a story, as was often his custom. It is the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Much has been made of this parable. One can see that it is not the answer to the question about eternal life, but to the subsequent question, which is a dodge, "who is my neighbor?" Interestingly, Jesus does not answer the question. Instead he tell the story.

The story is so familiar that it only barely needs to be repeated. On the other hand, because it is so familiar, it must be repeated lest we fail to pay it adequate attention. That is the trouble with familiar things.

There was a man who went down to Jericho and was attacked by bandits, who beat him, robbed him, and left him for dead. On the other side of the road came a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. The first two represent the religious leaders who model righteousness and goodness for their communities. They failed to live up to their calling. They passed by on the other side.

The third person was a member of a despised community, thought to be morally inferior and considered an enemy. He bound the victim's wounds, carried him to town and paid for his care, promising to be responsible for whatever continued care might be needed.

Between this parable and the one about the Prodigal Son, which comes later in Luke's gospel, two of the most important outcomes of faith are revealed; care and responsibility towards all other people regardless of their backgrounds; and forgiveness, even towards

those among our own families who betray and wrong us. This week, our attention is on the Good Samaritan.

As previously mentioned, the parable was instigated by a question, “and just who is my neighbor?” The answer, it would seem, that would make the most sense, would be, “everyone.” And that answer could be stated in this way; your neighbors are your family and friends, those closely acquainted, most intimately related. The Gospel of John repeats, “I give you a new command, love each other.”

But then it would also include others, not as intimately related but with whom there is proximity enough to interact, to have encounters, to do business with. In many places the scriptures repeat the line from Leviticus, “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Yet, as this parable implies, there is more, because not only the stranger who is the victim of violence a neighbor, but also the Samaritan, who comes from the despised community, which means that one must agree with the Sermon on the Mount, “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.”

Any of these answers would make sense and all of them taken together are correct. My guess is that these answers have been given to you before in previous settings, bible studies and devotionals, worship services where this parable was the focus of the sermon. I have given them myself. But when I did I always felt as if I was missing something, for none of these is the answer Jesus gave. It is not so much that

there is *more* to say, as it is there is something *different* to say.

This morning I would like an attempt, briefly, at the something different. The answer Jesus actually gives is the telling of the story, and that leads to a re-phrasing of the question, “who was the neighbor to the man who had fallen among thieves?” And that was followed by a command, “go and do likewise.”

Maybe this answer that Jesus gives by telling this parable is little more than flipping the issue, turning it back on the duplicity of the person asking about eternal life, but really just wanting to know the minimum requirements.

Certainly, Jesus is saying that the Samaritan is the neighbor, and even the priest and the Levite. He implies that the beaten man is our neighbor, but the bandits don't seem to enter into the conversation. The story takes for granted that they are not in question, but preposterously, one is led to believe that sooner or later they will be included too.

The way Jesus ends it, by pointing out that the Samaritan was a good neighbor to the man who had been robbed and beaten, leaves the question unanswered, turning it into a command. The journey we each of us take from the question, “who is my neighbor,” to the command, “go and do likewise,” is the tender teaching of Jesus. The emphasis is not on the question, “who is my neighbor?” Rather, the emphasis is, “to whom am I a neighbor?”

For two-thousand years the world had been pondering the meaning of this parable. When we read the parable or hear the expression used to describe someone's behavior or their example, we can join the procession of the ages and spend some time pondering the question, "what kind of neighbor am I?"

Am I kind and generous?

Am I honest even when the truth hurts?

Am I responsible, honorable, and dignified?

Am I merciful and forgiving?

Am I courageous?

Do I run to help when someone is in need, or do I mind my own business?

We are all familiar with the old State Farm jingle, it already rings our ears anyway, so let us attach a new meaning to it, and hear it in the answer to the question Jesus never actually says right out loud;

It is the premise of the Christian faith that the most important ends in life are to love God with all the heart, soul, strength, and mind; and to love one's neighbor as the self.

"Who is my neighbor?" says the man, who may not mean well.

Who was the neighbor to the man who fell among thieves?

"Like a good neighbor . . . go and do likewise."