

"Neighbor-Love"
Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary Year C
July 11, 2010
Text: Luke 10:25-37
Dr. David T. Howeth

Most of the time when we look at this parable, we put ourselves in the position of either the man who was beaten by the robbers or the Samaritan who rescued him. However, this time I would like for us to identify with someone else as we look at this parable, because it may help us to see it in a slightly different light.

The parable was told in response to a question that an expert in the law asked Jesus. The scripture says that this lawyer stood up to "test" Jesus. In reality, their conversation was more like a young defense attorney starting a career with a major law firm and consulting with a partner as to the subtleties of the law as it pertains to the case in question. In other words, the lawyer in the story was asking Jesus about loopholes in the law. If we will visualize the story from this perspective, I think it will help us understand their conversation. Looking at the parable from the viewpoint of the questioner, the lawyer, I would like to make the following points that relate to our lives.

First, like the lawyer, **all of us want to know the answer to the question of eternal life.** The seeking of eternal life is the great quest of humanity. If you can recall the storyline in the third of the Indiana Jones movies, you know that the quest for the Holy Grail is actually a quest for immortality, for eternal life. All of us want it. The lawyer's question is ours as well. How do we obtain eternal life? How can our lives have an eternal quality about them?

I think the question about eternal life involves more than just a concern about what happens to us after we die. For me, at least, the question is more about the meaning of life as we experience it on this side of the grave. It is a search for value and meaning in our everyday lives. The question is, then, "what is of lasting and everlasting significance?" What really matters in life, so much so that it is of value generation after generation, time after time, situation after situation? It is this kind of question I think the lawyer is posing to Jesus, and it is our most basic question as well.

Second, like the lawyer, **all of us know the answer to this question already.** Jesus answered the lawyer's question with a question, that is, what his interpretation of the law was. Jesus implied that this person already knew the answer to the question. So do we. We find eternal life, a life that has an eternal quality about it, a life of value and meaning, a life that is fulfilling, as we love God and the

neighbor as ourselves. We don't need to search for God's will for our lives—we know it already. We are to love God, love ourselves, and love our neighbors.

Third, like the lawyer, **we want to know what are "the bottom line" minimal requirements to earn eternal life.** The lawyer was looking for loopholes, and so he wanted to find out who Jesus considered to be his neighbor. He wanted his responsibility defined and made specific, clearly designated and spelled-out. He was hoping that Jesus would go along with the rabbis' teaching that the neighbor was a fellow Jew only. In other words, the lawyer wanted the neighbor to be someone just like him, someone easy to love and easy to help.

We want the same thing, if we are honest enough to admit it. We want to practice a "works righteousness" in which we earn our way to eternal life. And we just want to be told what the minimum requirements are, what we have to do to make the grade. How many times a month do I have to be in worship or attend Sunday School? How much money do I have to give? How many committees do I have to serve on? How many times do I have to take the pastor to lunch?

The parable, in a subtle way, makes the point that serving the Lord is a radical act. The gospel is not a set of rules; it is a life of love. Following Jesus means that we become lovers, not rule followers,

and as lovers of God, ourselves, and our neighbors, we look for those people who are in need of our attention and affection.

Fourth, like the lawyer, **we need to be reminded that many persons in need are innocent victims.** The man who was robbed and beaten didn't deserve the treatment he got. There was nothing he could have done about the situation he was in. The distance from Jerusalem to Jericho is about seventeen miles, descending sharply toward the Jordan River just north of the Dead Sea. The old road, even more than the present one, curved through rugged, bleak, rocky terrain where robbers easily could hide. It was considered especially dangerous, even in a day when travel normally was full of hazards. The man simply was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Many of the people in need in our time are innocent victims, and I think one of the sins of the middle and upper middle class is that we bear false witness against our neighbors who are in need. We tend to do so because we project on them *our* situations and the privileges our situations bring us. We assume that because we are free to make choices, they are. We assume that because we have opportunities, they have as well. We assume that because we can work to better our lives, so can they.

But it may not be true in every case; some cases yes, but not every case. Many of the people in need in our society and our world are

in need precisely because they do not have a chance to be otherwise. They are innocent victims of cycles of injustice or poverty.

Fifth, like the lawyer, **all of us avoid opportunities to help those in need by distancing ourselves somewhat from needy situations.** I think Jesus used the example of the priest and the Levite in the story to demonstrate to the lawyer what his own response probably would have been in that situation. They went out of their way to avoid contact with the victimized man. For whatever reason, they walked on the other side of the road.

Most of the time we isolate ourselves from the needs of others. We live in a rather affluent part of Dallas, a place where there are not many pockets of poverty. Most of us live here, at least in part, because we want to stay away from neighborhoods where there are problems. That is understandable. We tend to associate only with people like ourselves. We want to live where it is safe, where it is clean, where there are good schools, and where there is little need and suffering. But only when we quit avoiding needy people and isolating ourselves from them, do we find that we are like the Good Samaritan. Then we find ourselves moved to pity and motivated to action. We can be Good Samaritans only when we risk involvement.

Sixth, like the lawyer, **all of us know that to help someone in a significant way requires time, money, and effort.** Jesus helped the

lawyer to be reminded of this fact. The Samaritan made a significant investment in rendering aid to the man in the parable. He shared his own oil and wine with him, and these were rather precious commodities in that day. He put the man on his own donkey. He spared no expense in helping the victimized man, and the Samaritan's investment was in terms of time as well as money. He may have had to miss something he had planned to do or give up something he had wanted to purchase in order to help the man. It is never easy to be helpful. Programs of ministry always take more time, talent, and expense than we plan for them to. Helping has its costs. But don't all good things in life come at a cost?

Seventh, like the lawyer, **all of us have to drop our prejudices if we are to be good neighbors.** For a Jew in Jesus' time, the idea of a "good" Samaritan was an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. It was considered impossible for a Samaritan to be good. All Samaritans were thought to be bad. Notice that even after Jesus told the parable, the lawyer could not say the word "Samaritan." He referred to him as "the one who showed mercy." Prejudice runs deep. But if we are going to be helpful to those around us who are in need, we must not look down on them. We must not pre-judge them. We must not be patronizing and condescending.

But there is another lesson for us in this parable. If we will hear it, I think the parable gives us an example of the kind of person the Lord considers good. Who is good in the Lord's eyes? It is the person who shows mercy to others, who avoids being judgmental, who extends grace, who is willing to do whatever it takes to help those who are in need. In other words, it is not my skin color, my nationality, my gender, my age, my sexual orientation, my material possession, my address, my car, my portfolio of investments, my appearance, even my church. What makes me good before God, according to this parable, is how loving, caring, and generous I am with those who are in need. As followers of Jesus, we are to show mercy to *all* those we meet who are in need, *regardless of who they are*. This is "neighbor-love," and this is what God considers good.

Jesus ended his response to the lawyer's question about eternal life with a simple command: "Go and do likewise." Jesus is saying the same thing to us. He is saying to us, "If you want eternal life, go and look in your own experience for ways to be like the Samaritan in the parable. Help those you meet who are in need, those whom life has beaten in some way and left for dead. Assist those people, provide for their needs, nurse them back to health, give them another chance, show neighbor-love toward them. If you do, you will find the kind of life, an eternal kind of life, you are seeking."