

Luke 10:25-37

Trinity 13, August 25, 2024
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And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?"²⁷ And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."²⁸ And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."²⁹ But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"³⁰ Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion.³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him.³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.'³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?"³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."

As we have become more connected with the world around us, I think many of us have become *disconnected* with those closest to us, our nextdoor neighbors. Growing up, I knew *many* of our neighbors. There were the Nowaks across the street and the Fischers next to them. Across the other street were the Lorenzes, and a couple houses up from there was the Lamers family. Next door to us were the Kurgers. A little further down were the Wiedenfelds. And we all knew each other and interacted and provided babysitting and on occasion would provide that cup of flour if a neighbor came knocking.

I don't know my neighbors anymore nearly as well as I used to. And I think that's probably true for many Americans. As a society, we've grown disconnected from one another, maybe a little distrusting, and generally we tend to try to keep our distance. I imagine that doesn't go for all of you, especially if you've lived in the same house for many years, but I think you'd agree that in general, being neighborly just isn't very common anymore.

And that's also true if you expand your scope *beyond* your immediate neighborhood. We're called by God to be neighbors not just to those in our immediate vicinity, but even to every person, especially to those in need. And in *this* regard, not a one of us has been a good neighbor. Keeping this in mind, we'll look at the example Jesus gives us in our text of one who *was* a good neighbor, and I think we'll also find that *we too* have just such a neighbor. Our theme for this morning is:

Like a Good Neighbor, Jesus is There

So, a lawyer comes up to Jesus with a question. This lawyer, by the way, wasn't an attorney the way that we think of lawyers—no, he was an expert in the Law of Moses, that's what it meant to be a lawyer back then. And he asks Jesus, "**Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?**" Of course, as good Lutherans, we recognize that was a pretty poor question. "**What shall I do to inherit?**" If eternal

life is an inheritance (and it is) then it's a free gift, given to us through the death of the one who wrote it in His will! There's *nothing* you can *do* to inherit eternal life! Nevertheless, the lawyer asks the question, and Jesus throws the question right back at him: ***"What is written in the Law? How do you read it?"*** And since he was an expert in the Law, he knew the answer! ***"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."*** "Good answer!" Jesus said. ***"Do this, and you will live."***

Now, that presents a difficult situation for the lawyer, because he knows as an expert in the Law that loving God with your everything and loving your neighbor as yourself is *really* a tall task—one that's far too impossible for anyone to achieve! So, ***"Desiring to justify himself, [he] said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'"*** You see what he's looking for, don't you? He's hoping for a loophole of some kind. Because if the neighbors that God calls you to love are just your family and friends, well that could *plausibly* be a bit more doable! And, as our text says, he was desiring to justify himself. That is, he was looking for a way that he could be certain that based upon *his* own actions, he could be found innocent before a holy God. And that was his entire purpose behind his questioning in the first place: ***"What must I do?"*** He wasn't interested in *God* justifying him, he wanted to justify himself.

So, Jesus tells him the parable of the Good Samaritan. Now, you might have wondered this before—the man asks, ***"Who is my neighbor?"*** And then the parable really doesn't seem to address it! There's a lot of stuff in there about *being* a good neighbor, but it really doesn't answer the question: ***"Who is my neighbor?"*** And that's because Jesus is really answering a different question. The man has rightly said that God's Law requires him to love God and love his neighbor as himself, and while the man is trying to avoid the *neighbor* part, Jesus just wants him to ask: ***"Have I loved my neighbor as myself?"***

And that's the question we ought to ask *ourselves* as we consider this text. To do so, let's put ourselves into this parable, let's see if we can find ourselves represented in this story. First, let's take a look at the priest and the Levite. We all know the story well-enough. One after the other, they both came and saw the man lying there dying in a ditch, and rather than offering any aid, they simply crossed the street and passed by on the other side.

Now, we don't get to see inside their minds to understand their thought processes, but I can easily imagine what they *might* have been thinking! If they were, perhaps, heading up to the Temple for worship—well, they both have important roles to play! The priests were those who made sacrifices for sin, who acted as intercessors—confessing sins and returning with forgiveness—and they also instructed the people. The Levites did all the rest—they led the singing of the Psalms, they acted as guards, they provided maintenance and really everything else required for the worship of God was under the auspices of the Levites. And I could imagine that they saw this man lying there bleeding out and thought to themselves, ***"I've got important things to do! I can't waste my time here, someone else will come eventually, but I've got somewhere to be."***

Or, maybe they saw the man lying there, clearly having been beaten and robbed by bandits, as historians tell us *often* happened on that particular road, and perhaps they thought the bandits might be nearby! Maybe it was a trap! If they stopped and helped the man, they could be the next victims! *Whatever* their excuses were, I imagine they felt that they had *good* reasons for passing by.

Of course, we can sit here and picture the scene and *rightly* say that they had no good reasons for avoiding their neighbor-in-need. It's appalling to even think of them justifying their actions, no matter how compelling their reasons might have seemed to them. And yet... I wonder how often *I've* done the same. The sin that these men committed is what we call a sin of *omission*. You might know, sins can be categorized into sins of commission and omission—commission is when you actually commit a sin and do something wrong, omission is where you omit to do something that is right. Well, here they saw a man who needed their help, and they didn't offer it—that's a sin of omission.

Well, how many times have I omitted doing something that I *should have done* and then justified myself with excuses? I don't know that I can think of any specific examples, but I *can* name the specific excuses that I've often *used*! "I don't have any time, I'm running late!" "They probably just want to buy drugs." "He created this mess for himself." "If I say something it will be awkward." "Somebody else will help." Sound familiar? Are any of those valid reasons for not loving our neighbor?

Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, **"Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed. Owe no one anything, except to love each other."** (Romans 13:7-8) His point is that if you are indebted to anyone, pay your debts; but you will never be able to pay off the debt of love that you owe to your neighbor, because you will always owe them love. But how often do we instead treat our neighbors as if "I don't owe anything to anyone"?

So yes, we are a lot like the Levite and the priest in this text, and that being the case, we're also a lot like the man lying there in the ditch. Because God's Law requires that we love the Lord with all our heart and all our soul and all our strength and all our mind and that we love our neighbors as ourselves! And the Law gives us that promise, **"Do this, and you will live."** But the opposite is also true, "Don't do this, and you will die." And *that* we haven't done it means we're actually worse off than the man in the ditch. We're not just half-dead, we're dead. As Paul says, **"You were dead in trespasses and sins."** (Ephesians 2:1)

And as everyone knows, a dead man can't so much as lift a finger to help himself. He's dead! And so were we. Our sins leave us powerless and helpless. Eternal torment lay stretched before us as what we rightfully deserve, and we're powerless to prevent it. Our only hope then, our *only* hope, is that perhaps someone passing by might stop to help. And it's happened!

You see, the Good Samaritan in our text is a perfect picture of Jesus and what Jesus has done for you. If there was ever anyone who might have had valid reasons for not helping the man in the ditch, it would have been a Samaritan. It's no secret to us that the Jews detested the Samaritans, and it was no secret to the Samaritans either. Jews would often pray that Samaritans would have no part in the resurrection of life. It was taught that if you welcomed a Samaritan into your home, you were laying up judgments for your children. It was thought better to suffer dire need than to receive even a little charity from a Samaritan.

Yes, if that Samaritan saw that man lying there in a ditch and thought, "I'm not going to help him since he would never lift a finger to help me," not only would he likely be *correct* in his assumption, we'd also probably think him justified in deciding to pass by on the other side.

But that's not what the Good Samaritan did. He had compassion, and he dressed his wounds, pouring on expensive ointments to soothe the man's hurts. And if he had stopped there, we could think, "Wow, that's being a *good* neighbor." But that's not where he stopped. Because then he put him on his own animal, the Samaritan going there on by foot; he took him to an inn and took care of him further; he paid the innkeeper two days' worth of wages to provide further care *and* promised to cover any further costs. Whatever the price, the Samaritan would pay it.

And wouldn't you know it, that's exactly what your Savior has done for you. He alone could have had countless valid reasons for refusing to help you and me, but He *refused* to pass by on the other side. He saw how helpless we were, and He was moved with compassion for us. He provided absolutely everything that was needed to guarantee eternal life for us. ***"God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved."*** (Ephesians 2:4-5)

The cost of doing so was much more than the price of a hotel room and some medicine. Unlike the Samaritan, Jesus paid with His own blood. He loved you so dearly that He carried with Him to the cross every one of your sins. And when He died on that cursed tree, all your sins died with Him. And three days later, when He rose from the grave, He declared that to be the proof of His precious promise: ***"Because I live, you will live also."*** (John 14:19)

So, the man left dead on the side of the road, he lived to see another day. And while he is integral to the story, he doesn't say a thing, he doesn't *do* a thing. No matter, he had a very good neighbor who did everything for him. And you do too. The Law places before you the requirement of perfect love with the promise, ***"Do this, and you will live."*** And of course, that's a promise whose condition is impossible for us to achieve. But the good news is that Jesus *has* done it. Jesus did *this*—loved God with everything and showed perfect love to His neighbors. And God says that because He did it, *we* will live. So, there's no need to try to justify ourselves, Christ has already done that for us.

So, if you ever find yourself wondering along with the lawyer if there's anything more you can do to guarantee your salvation, remember who you are in this story. You're the man on the side of the road, totally helpless, but not totally hopeless. Because **Like a Good Neighbor, Jesus is There.** He's done everything required, and He's left nothing for you.

But He *does* tell you, ***"You go, and do likewise."*** So, in faith toward our Savior, let's get to know our neighbors' names. Let's get to know our neighbors' needs. And let's help them, whoever they might be, by supplying any physical needs that lie within our power. But most of all, let's do everything we can to lead them, too, into the arms of the real Good Samaritan: Jesus Christ. In His saving name, Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) Amen.