

**Fifth Sunday after the Pentecost**  
**July 14, 2019**  
**Northfield, MA**

**Scripture:** Luke 10:25-37

This parable is all too familiar. Known as the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the term “good Samaritan” entered common usage long ago. It’s so common that many people who have no idea about this parable use the term to describe someone who practices kindness.

If we’ve attended church long enough, we’ve probably heard lots of sermons on it because it comes up on this Sunday every three years. And from a preacher’s perspective, we’ve probably preached it every three years for too many lectionary cycles.

Most of us probably know that this parable shocked its early listeners because first century Jews had a low regard for Samaritans. Overwhelmingly, they would have found a Samaritan giving assistance to a man left for dead on the Jericho road while a priest and a Levite walked past him completely unexpected. We might have heard an explanation about the priest and Levite walking past the man in order to avoid becoming ritually impure, despite that they were not going to Jerusalem, but away from it as Jericho is a substantially lower elevation than Jerusalem.

Typically, we concentrate on the lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” The Latin American liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, noted about the parable, “The neighbor was the Samaritan who *approached* the wounded man and *made him his neighbor*. The neighbor, as has been said, is not the one whom I find in my path, but rather the one in whose path I place myself, the one whom I approach and actively seek.” According to Gutierrez, defining neighbors has much more to do with who we care for and not who lives in close proximity.

Today, though, let's step back from the specifics of the parable. Instead of making the parable the central element from which we derive Jesus' teaching, let's enter the parable from the outside to learn what Jesus was saying in a larger context and what the lawyer heard.

First, we set the scene by asking the who's there and what just happened. The seventy disciples whom Jesus sent out to proclaim that the "kingdom of God was near" surrounded him. Having vanquished Satan, they returned elated. Jesus ended his remarks to them saying, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it."

(10:23b-24) When Jesus said this, he used two different words for see. Referring to the seventy, he used "see" as in understanding or comprehending. Referring to prophets and kings, he used "see" as in simply seeing. Loosely retranslated, his remarks might sound like this: "Blessed are the eyes who understand what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you understand and could not and to hear what you hear and could not."

A lawyer was among them and stood up to test Jesus. His question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" was a theological one. Jesus threw it back to the lawyer by asking him to cite the law. He also used this as a teaching moment for the seventy.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength," the lawyer replied. His citation was a variant on Deut. 6:5, also known as the *shema*, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." The *shema* is considered by many to be the central prayer in Judaism. The *shema* encapsulates the first half of the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. The lawyer added, "and your neighbor as yourself," which is Lev. 19:18b.

By reciting the *shema* and adding that little bit from Leviticus, the lawyer clearly established himself as a devout Jew.

Establishing his devotion as a Jew, however, was not enough for the lawyer. Wanting to justify his relationship with God, he asked, “Who is my neighbor?”

The parable answered the lawyer’s initial question about eternal life.

Jesus’ references to eternal life were not to proclaim life after death. Rather, eternal life was a life with God as in our relationship with God. Quoting Jesus, John wrote, “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.” (John 5:24) We have eternal life when we eschew the life of death to embrace true life, a life rooted in love and justice. We have eternal life when we live not of this world, which is the world of death, but the world of God as taught by Jesus, which is the world of life. Paul wrote towards the end of 1 Timothy, “Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life” (6:12a) and then, “As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.” (6:17-19)

Eternal life does not begin with our deaths, but with our living. We experience eternal life in the fullness of our relationship with God.

The parable, then, made two points for the lawyer. First, eternal life came from showing compassion, practicing kindness, and being generous. Second, eternal life was not exclusively a

relationship between God and Israel, but eternal life was universal. Eternal life was for all people, including Samaritans. Implicitly, one's standing, as illustrated by the Levite and the priest who did not stop, was not an assurance of eternal life, just as the lawyer's devotion as Jew and knowledge of the law didn't assure him of eternal life either.

Following closely upon the return of the seventy, Jesus' lesson connected the kingdom of God with eternal life. Jesus was not promising eternal life as in afterlife, life after death. Life after death is another stage of eternal life. The final stage is the last days as when Ezekiel heard God say, "And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live." (Ez. 37:13-14a)

Jesus' ministry was not to save us for life after death, but to save us from a life of death. Death is the life we live when we live in fear. Death is the life when we live believing we never have enough. Death is the life when we live without gratitude for the graces of daily living. Death is the life we live when we always try to surpass everyone around us. Death is the life we have when we have no faith in what we cannot see or hear.

We will have eternal life when we practice compassion, kindness, and generosity. We will have eternal life when we make the stranger our neighbor. We will have eternal life when we love our neighbor as ourselves. We will have eternal life when we love God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our might.