

Scripture

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

Patter Field

Many people today, including Christians, assume keeping God's law is not possible or reasonable. This passage challenges that assumption, assuring us that there is blessing in obedience and that it is reasonable, accessible, and feasible. All this is true because God is working with his people to make living in covenant possible.

⁹ and the Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, ¹⁰ when you obey the Lord your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. ¹¹ Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ¹² It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" ¹³ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" ¹⁴ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

Luke 10:25-37

This passage is one of the most well-known and well-loved stories of Scripture, which makes it hard for us to hear or acknowledge its truth, and to attend to its challenge. Behind the story is the question about eternal life, a clear understanding of the law, and our failure to embrace it fully.

²⁵ An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷ 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 given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

²⁹ But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰ Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, 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 while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.' ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Sermon

And the Neighbor Is...?
Luke 10:25-37

Have you asked any good questions lately? Have you been asked any good questions? This week, as I was driving home from the church, listening to NPR I was introduced to a new podcast program called '*No Stupid Questions*'. I like it. Many times, during my interim at other churches I would hold an 'ask the pastor' Sunday, where instead of preaching at the members they would ask me questions about the faith. Privately I called it 'stump the chump' Sunday. But I truly like it when people ask me questions, because whether my answer is good or not, it makes me think.

Today's reading in the gospel seems something like a 'stump the chump' moment. At least that is how we often want to interpret it. But in Jesus' day it was very common to have open discussions, questions, answers and repartee. So, when the expert of the law challenged Jesus with his question, it was not a bad thing; it was a normal thing. In fact, his approach to Jesus suggests that he saw Jesus as an equal in knowing and teaching the law. Even the questions are intriguing because they do not mean what we think they mean. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" is not the question of a 21st century fundamentalist, concerned with eternity. It is posed by a first century Jew, for whom 'eternal life' was the full life God promised here and now, as we heard from Deuteronomy today.

Jesus' response with his question was also normal, not because he was trying to avoid the question, or shame the questioner, rather he was trying to establish an understanding from which to enter dialogue. If the expert had said 'you shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God am holy' it would have led to a whole different dialogue. So, when this man answered with the love commandment, Jesus stood in full agreement with him.

The difficulty for the man, and for us, was its application - specifically, 'who then is my neighbor.' And like any good rabbi, or prophet, Jesus hooks us, not with a definition, but with a story, the parable of the Good Samaritan. Which is hard for us to hear, because we have heard it so often, and it feels like an old saw. "Be nice" - isn't that what it's all about. Only it's not. The question was 'who is my neighbor.' So, Jesus goes about to show us something strangely 'unneighborly'.

He begins his story, not really with the one poor soul who winds up in serious trouble, but with good religious people – much like the man who asked the question, much like us. These good people (and they are good - well intentioned and faithful) walk right by the man who is suffering. Jesus never tells us why. Was it that they were too 'spiritually' upright to risk being tainted by this man? We don't know. Were they perhaps too busy to stop, too involved in too many other programs, and too loaded with responsibilities to add one more concern. We also don't know. All we know is that they made a wide berth around this suffering man.

But the third time's the charm, and here is the hero of the story, only he is anything but Clark Kent. He is a despised outcast, a Samaritan. He is the equivalent of a Palestinian working man on the street of Israel, or a Muslim visitor in the US, maybe even a 'Trump Supporter' at a Gay Rights Parade: immediate suspicion, immediate distrust, immediate ill will. And yet, this is the one who responds, who cares, who goes far beyond any law or expectation to help.

That is where Jesus ends his story, with an ordinary, if overlooked and undervalued man, doing what was needed, and going beyond what was needed to what was gracious and loving, as scripture might say - 'being perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.' (Matthew 5:48) Now, Jesus wants to know, not who do you identify with, or who are you in this story. Not who we might be willing to accept as our neighbor, but what are you doing. Jesus' final question to the man was not – 'so who is the neighbor' but more importantly - "Who acted as a neighbor". Because love, and faith, is about living, and living is about doing. The one who showed mercy, the one who did the merciful thing, the caring thing, is the one who is the neighbor. Not the other person on the street whom we do, or do not, recognize; but the person we recognize in the mirror. That's the neighbor. You.

So then 'go' Jesus says 'and do it.' Love God, and love your neighbor, really. "Do this and you will have everlasting life." Do this and you will experience the life of God, here and now, and to eternity too. And that is where the story ends. Not just the parable, but the consequences for the questioner. Did he see himself in the parable? Did he feel a twinge of discomfort? Or were his eyes opened to see a new possibility, a new

understanding of God, God's law, and God's people? Did he follow Jesus' directive 'Go and do likewise'? We will never know.

But we can know what we will do. We are now called to finish the story in our lives. Yes, to go and do likewise. But also, and perhaps just as importantly, to keep asking Jesus our questions, to keep on inquiring, to keep seeking what it means to follow God's law. Because if we think we already know all the answers, then discipleship has lost its purpose. So ask your questions, my friends, and pray for the grace to live into the answer. Amen.

***Hymn**

Lord Whose Love
insert CH 461

Joys and Concerns

Prayers of the People

Thank you, Gracious God, for the depth of your love for us. Thank you for Jesus Christ who enacted your love so fully and faithfully, and for your Spirit who continues the outpouring of your love in us and through us. With hope and courage, we come to you now, seeking the grace and power to live as true disciples and followers of Christ.

We pray, for your church and for this congregation. May this be a place where your mercy is proclaimed in our words and made real by our deeds. May we continue to grow in love and become true neighbors to one another, to our community and to all the world. We pray for our world and all its leaders. May their eyes and hearts be opened to the truth that we are all neighbors and kin to one another, and guide them in the ways that will establish true peace and justice. We pray as well for all who are in need today, that they may all know your gracious care. Grant your healing to the ill, your comfort to the sorrowful, and your provision to the needy. We especially lift up... and we thank you for...

We praise you, wondrous God, for all your goodness to us, through Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray.

The Lord's Prayer

Choral Response

Remember Me

Offering

Invitation : “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all you mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” This love motivates our giving. As God has loved us, let us now return that love in our offering of energy, time and money. Let us give with joy.

Offertory Music

“Praise Ye the Lord”
Franz Joseph Haydn. Arr. Nathan J. Arnold

Doxology

Prayer: O God, we have known the depth of your good will and the challenge of your call. Now we seek to act with compassion toward one another and toward our neighbors near and far. May these gifts, and our lives, bear the good fruit of your gospel and extend your care to all. Amen.

* **Hymn** Christian Rise and Act Your Creed # NCH 537

*Common Commission

Let us go forth into the world in peace, being of good courage, holding fast to that which is good, rendering to no one evil for evil, strengthening the faint-hearted, supporting the weak, helping the afflicted, honoring all persons, loving and serving the Lord, and rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

* **Benediction**

Go now into the world

And may our God make your love grow and overflow for each other and for all people. May your hearts be made strong, holy and pure before God.

1 Thessalonians 3:12-13, adj

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.

Postlude “God Be With You.”

Traditional. Arr. E.L. Ashford

music provided by Chris Harris and Lynne Walker