

**Luke 10: 25-37 “Mixing the Good and the Bad” Rev. Janet Chapman 7/13/25**

**It was the heart of summer and 7-year-old Bobby was bored and missing his school friends. Luckily, new neighbors were moving in next door and maybe they would have kids he could play with? So he ventured next door to say hello. He came back and told his mom he made some new friends. “Great,” said his mom. “Are they boys or girls?” “One is a boy and one is a girl,” he answered. “Super! How old are they?” He responded, “I didn’t ask. Should I?” “Well,” she said, “it’s a nice way to get better acquainted.” Bobby ran back next door and returned an hour later, shouting through the screen door, “Mom, I found out how old my new friends are. The girl is 65 and the boy is 70.” Children’s openness to strangers can often remind us what it means to be a good neighbor.**

**In one of the most familiar parables in scripture, the question, “Who is my neighbor?” is central to its understanding. Although familiar with this story, we should never equate that to mean we understand it all. We get the traditional example of “Don’t be like this... be like this.” Don’t be self-righteous, don’t assume God doesn’t work through people you look down on. Instead be like the Samaritan, helping those you meet each day who need your help. That is the Sunday School version and there is nothing wrong with that, but it doesn’t dive into the many layers this parable holds like the layers of an onion, to be peeled back one by one. Alyce McKenzie states that all of Jesus’ parables are attempts to explain what the kingdom of God is like, what the realm of God is meant to be. One answer is that the kingdom of God shows up when and where you least expect it. The onion layers of today peel back to reveal that God’s kingdom is so much bigger than we could ever imagine. God is greater than any one religion, nation, or race, and greater than our need to be right. While that may be upsetting at first, it is also very freeing, for us to be reminded that there is always something new for us to learn about the spaciousness of God’s heart.**

**Another layer unfolds in our story’s title, the Good Samaritan, which is never once mentioned in the actual telling of the story. Our Bibles have added that heading, but Jesus never told it that way. The story has defined the word “Samaritan” for people who would not recognize a real Samaritan if they bumped into one on the street. Yet, this takes away the real gut punch in the story because when Jesus first told it, his hearers thought of Samaritans as anything but good. In fact, it would be like someone trying to tell us a story**

about the Good Hamas, the Good Neo-Nazi, or the Good Al-Qaeda. But let's start where the story starts. You could call it the story of the Argumentative Lawyer – I don't know how many of you have lawyers in your family but in respect to my attorney daughter, who learned to argue at a young age, I promise not to lay it on too hard against lawyers. After all, the lawyer is just doing his job. Barbara Brown Taylor points out that at the beginning of it, he could be any one of us. By the end of it, he is all of us. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he asks Jesus. Luke says the man was testing Jesus. That isn't necessarily a bad thing to test people who claim to speak for God. The lawyer's question is a very good one to ask any preacher. If a preacher says, "Open your wallet and give me all your money," then you might want to think twice about going back to that church. If a preacher says, "Look deep into my eyes and repeat after me," then I'm not sure I would go back there. But Jesus didn't do either. Instead, he asked the lawyer to think for himself. Jesus uses the Socratic teaching method asking, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" There's a Woody Allen story about a man who asked his rabbi, "Why does a rabbi always answer a question with a question?" The rabbi thought for a moment and said, "Why shouldn't a rabbi always answer a question with a question?" Although frustrating for those who like straightforward, cut and dried, black and white answers, Jesus reminds us this is a very good way to teach. By bouncing the question back, Jesus not only made the man think for himself, he also found out what the man believed. The lawyer answers, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself." Some of you know this as the Great Commandment, a combination of verses from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Jesus quotes it in Matthew and Mark, but for some reason, Luke puts the Great Commandment in the lawyer's mouth instead- maybe to remind us that God's wisdom can come through any of us, not just our spiritual leaders? Or maybe Luke did it as a clue that just because we know the right answers, and can say them out loud, it doesn't mean we have tried putting them into practice? Jesus responds, "You have given the right answer, do this and you will live."

So there is a straightforward answer for you – if the lawyer will actually do what he knows is right, if he will do love, then he can start living eternal life anytime he wants. He doesn't have to sell all that he owns and give the proceeds to the poor- that's another story. He doesn't have to take up his cross and follow Jesus – that's a different story as

well. In this story, all the man has to do is love God with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind and his neighbor as himself. If he will do that, then he lives. But the lawyer, who set out to test Jesus and is now feeling he's the one being tested, tries to save face by asking for a definition of terms. You know how that works, right? When someone asks you a question and you give your best possible answer, but you can tell from the person's raised eyebrows that there is something they doubt, you buy yourself some time by seeking clarification. Exactly who is it that you are supposed to be doing what for, under what kind of circumstances, and for approximately how long? Lawyers aren't the only ones who do this for a living.

One of the most famous authors and martyrs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who took on the evils of Nazi Germany and lost his life because of it, addresses the lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor?" with brutal honesty. In one of the best-selling faith books of all time, "The Cost of Discipleship," he asserts that the only reason to ask that question is because we want to shrink our circle of responsibility, to know who we have to love so, we can know whom we don't have to love. It's really asking "Who don't I need to be concerned about? Who isn't my neighbor? Whose suffering can I ignore?" In Bonhoeffer's words, the question itself is already a rebellion against God's Great Commandment. He says, "The whole parable of the Good Samaritan is Jesus' singular rejection and destruction of this question as satanic;" the question itself is sheer evil. While that may seem harsh to some of us, for Bonhoeffer it was a life-or-death matter. He wrote those lines in the 1930's before mass deportations of German Jews, but after Nazis had stripped the Jews of their citizenship and birth rights. German Jews existed in that precarious position whereby they were no longer fellow citizens with German Christians but were still trying to live and work somewhat as they had before, but increasingly targeted and scapegoated by the government. A Christian in 1937 Germany might be tempted, when thinking about the now noncitizens living in their town, hearing rumors about them committing crimes, spreading disease, and plotting against the state, and thus ask, "And who is my neighbor?" This was the temptation Bonhoeffer was trying to resist with uncompromising strength, teaching it to anyone he could. He wrote, "There is literally no time left to ask about someone else's qualifications. I must act and must obey God; I must be a neighbor to the other person." After Jesus tells the story, he asks

the lawyer which of the three was a neighbor to the battered man in the ditch? The lawyer can't even make himself say the "S" word to identify the hero who acts and obeys God. He says, "The one who showed him mercy." This isn't meant to make us feel better when we help somebody. It's designed to do brain surgery on us, opening up the possibility that we have our good guys and bad guys all mixed up. None of us really know what is inside of a person. We may think we know, based on how our people and their people interact; but we are all capable of surprising each other, every day, and a single act of mercy has the power to call a whole history of racism, nationalism, and religious intolerance into question. For example, Christians who demand we prioritize Americans over others are perpetuating a poison called the "order of loves" where you love your family, then you love the folks next door, then your community, then your fellow Americans, and then after that, you acknowledge the rest of the world. Pope Francis attacked this as a direct assault on the truth of our parable today, and thus on the Messiah who died trying to show the world another way.

Based on our story, it makes me wonder if God is trying to teach us that instead of making our lives always conform to our beliefs, maybe sometimes we should let our lives, let the events going on around us, help teach us what to believe. Because if you had asked the man in the ditch who would help him, the clergy, the church board member, or the despised foreigner, he would have gotten the answer all wrong. It wasn't until later that he had time to revise his answer, updating his beliefs to match his experience. It was the good Samaritan, who would have thought? Apparently, God would. Therefore, given the choice between passing by on the other side and being moved to act with mercy, the right answer always rings clear – Do love and you will live.