“***The Word Is Very Near***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, July 14, 2019

**Deuteronomy 30:11–14**

11 Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. 12It 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?” 13Neither 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?” 14No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

**Luke 10:25–37**

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” 27He 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.” 28And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” 30Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35The 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.’ 36Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” 37He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

This great story occurs only in the Gospel of Luke. Its basic moral lesson is simple and straightforward, yet it packs a punch, and is less simple than it seems at first glance.

Try to imagine yourself a Jew in that period. You would have looked up to the priests and the Levites. These are people who have dedicated their whole lives to the service of God. And yet, you can plainly see that these guys are of no help at all to the injured man. If you think about it, their religious training might even have done more harm than good, telling them that touching a bloody man would make them impure and unable to approach the temple. So they hastily crossed the street to avoid him.

Remember that the original question is “who is my neighbor?” Well, Jesus answers the question in story form, by having a despised foreigner come by and help, even going the extra mile, telling the innkeeper to do whatever needs to be done to help the fellow.

Why were the Samaritans despised by the Jews? They shared the same Israelite ancestry; they had the Torah and worshipped the Lord. But back in the 7th century BC, the Assyrian empire had forcibly imported some Gentiles into their neighborhoods in order to reduce Israelite nationalism, and, as people will do, they started intermarrying with these Gentiles over time. So the Samaritans in Jesus’ time were half-breeds, in the mind of Jews, and were especially despised for that. Further, their worship was centered at Mt. Gerizim rather than at Jerusalem, and the Jews took offense at this. *We* might have prejudices, too, different ones. How would Jesus tell the parable if he were speaking to Americans today? Maybe it would be the parable of the Good Mexican, or the Good Arab—something that would surprise us and annoy us and—hopefully—make us think.

But before it annoys us, we’ve already been drawn in by the story. Jesus told parables because a good story hooks us before our prejudices have time to kick in. He gets us morally engaged in the story and *caring* about the characters, and *then* he surprises us with the unexpected identity of the hero. The story is actually quite spare. The victim never speaks, the priest and the Levite never speak, except with their feet. All we see is the kindness of the Samaritan, and we hear of his thoughtful provision for the victim. Jesus asks who was the *real* neighbor? The answer is obvious, whether you’re biased or not. In fact, the lawyer can’t bring himself to say “the Samaritan,” he only says “the one who showed him mercy.” But he can’t help but get the point.

You’ll notice I’ve shifted attention to the reader or the *listener*. In ancient times, more people would have *heard* it than have *read* it. Do you see how Jesus has shaped this story so that the listener knows right away what the Samaritan also knows: that someone needs help, and that a true neighbor will act in neighborly way? Whatever our politics, whatever we think of Samaritans, this knowledge of the good is instinctive in us. And that’s what the Deuteronomy passage talks about. The word of God is not far away, or off in heaven. It’s not even locked up in the pages of a holy book. It’s in your heart, if you have any spirituality in you. You already know that it’s necessary to be neighborly.

The commandment or the word of God, that is, the *truth* of God, the *will* of God, is within you—at least if you have allowed it to grow within your heart, and in your thinking. If you have cultivated your inner garden at all, then the word is there, ready to whisper to your heart whenever you need to hear it. It is not too far away.

The Samaritan acted upon the word that was within his heart, and the kingdom of God was enacted there at that inn, with the assault victim and innkeeper as witnesses. The priest and Levite deprived themselves of this kingdom experience because of their cold-hearted snootiness, their religious superiority. That’s one of the more subtle lessons here: that supposed religious correctness might actually disguise hard-heartedness, a kind of spiritual stupidity.

It’s a lesson we learn over and over again in the New Testament, that moral and spiritual awareness are what really matter. There are many of these sayings: Follow the Spirit, not the letter; worship God in Spirit and in Truth; the kingdom of God is within you. And there are ones that show us that relationships come first, such as the saying “be doers of the word, not just hearers” (James 1:22), and Jesus’ instruction “go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister” (Matt 5:24). So let us draw upon the word that is in our heart, and act upon the good that urges us on from within. That word is never very far from us, is it?