

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 9-10, 2016
Luke 10:25-37

“Who is My Neighbor?”

It has been a tumultuous week in our nation with violence, bloodshed, unrest, and race relations near the boiling point. In the midst of this, I have wondered who those good Samaritans are – people behind the scenes working and serving quietly and without fanfare. We never hear about these people, but they are surely out there. Some years ago, a commentator named David Budbill shared the following story on National Public Radio (NPR): “Not long ago, I was walking along the street in Boston when down a side street came an old man in a wheel chair, rolling right down the middle of the street and into three lanes of onrushing traffic on Huntington Avenue. Suddenly cars were swerving everywhere, horns blaring, tires squealing, and drivers trying to weave around the old man and his wheelchair, so they could get going. I knew I should go after him, but for some reason I didn’t. I stood there and watched. Then an old car with a bad muffler pulled out of the snarl of cars and to the curb. And a young man hopped out and boldly walked into the traffic and up to the old man. The young man was wearing a knit cap and a sports sweatshirt of some kind, and hugely baggy jeans and hi-top sneakers. He took hold of the old man in his chair and gently wheeled him back toward the curb, then tilted the chair up and onto the sidewalk. He bent over the old man and said something to him. The old man nodded his head. The young man patted the old man’s shoulder and moved away toward his car. Then the young man turned, and looked straight at me, and shouted, “Why didn’t you help him? What’s the matter with you? Why didn’t you help him?” I wanted to apologize, tell him I meant to. But it was too late. The young man was already in his car and driving away. As I continued down Huntington Avenue that day feeling embarrassed and ashamed, I thought about that young man – that young black man, driving along, talking to himself about how self-centered, indifferent, and cold white people are. And I also thought about how many white people would step away in fear, cross the street, if they saw that young man coming down the sidewalk toward them, how they would step away from this good Samaritan, this young black man, who put himself at risk, who acted with compassion and was at that moment something I was not – a credit to his race, the human race” (Transcript of NPR’s “All Things Considered” from June 26, 1998).

Haven’t we all, at some point in life, been in David Budbill’s shoes? Haven’t we all not done the right thing by giving help where we should have, and felt shame and regret because we did not? Today’s Gospel lesson is a familiar one to many of us, and because it is familiar, we may think that we understand what it means. But Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan is a call to move from mere understanding to action; from knowing to doing. The two are not the same. The truth of Jesus’ parable for our lives is that we discover who our neighbor is only when we discover that we are a neighbor. And so the message for this day, based on Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel lesson, is entitled, “Who is My Neighbor?” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

This parable is unique to Luke’s Gospel; it is not found in Matthew, Mark, or John. Luke is concerned with the compassionate Christ, particularly as this relates to the disenfranchised and marginalized in the world around us. In order to understand the parable, we have to understand the context in which it was first spoken, and that leads us to the lawyer who was trying to “test” (πειράζω) Jesus. That word, “test,” is the same word used when Satan was testing or tempting Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1; Mark 1:13), and the intent is to lead to evil. Notice the lawyer’s question: “**Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?**” “What must I do?” Can anyone do anything to inherit eternal life? People may think so. They try and try and try, but how do you know if you’ve done enough good or been good enough to inherit eternal life? You never do. But Jesus answers the question anyway, referring the lawyer back to Torah: “**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...” (Luke 10:27). Jesus is here quoting the great *shemah* or creed of Judaism (Deuteronomy 6:4-5), but He then joins this with another passage from Torah: “... **you shall love your neighbor as yourself**” (Leviticus 19:18). This is a radical thing! Jesus is saying that to love God means that one must also love one’s neighbor. To have one is to have the other. Can it be that unless our love for God is making itself known in loving our neighbor, that something is missing? This isn’t just a theoretical question, but it is dealing with the core of our faith. And this must lead to how we conduct ourselves – how we live – in daily life. This most assuredly speaks to the issues of our day: how we treat one another, how we interact with one another regardless of who the other person may be. The lawyer already knew – or thought he knew – the answer that Jesus gave him from Torah, but it wasn’t good enough. He was trying to save face. He was looking for a theoretical definition of neighbor that would conform to his own preconceived definition. Instead, Jesus gives him a parable that leads him to answer his own question: “**And who is my neighbor?**” (Luke 10:29).

Jerusalem lies 2500 feet above sea level and Jericho about 1000 feet below sea level. This is a huge descent considering the distance between the two cities, which is only a little over twenty miles. In Jesus’ day, this was a twisting road with rock ledges and caves all around – a perfect place for robbers to hide out and wait for their next victim. The lone traveler was an easy mark for the robbers who took everything he had, even his clothes, beat him up, leaving him for dead by the side of the road. The robbers embody the first of three life philosophies: “What’s yours is mine, and I’ll take it.” The two professional church workers come by, the priest and the Levite – people you’d expect to step up and do the right thing. But they don’t, and instead, pass by on the other side. And why? Too risky? Can’t be bothered? Too busy? Their excuses are our own excuses because we still use them today. These folks embody the second of the three life philosophies: “What’s mine is mine, and I’ll keep it.” And then the Samaritan comes along. Jews and Samaritans had a long-standing hatred of one another that went back centuries. If anyone could be expected to pass by on the other side, it would be the Samaritan. But he didn’t; “**he had compassion**” (Luke 10:33), something which the other two did not. The Samaritan’s compassion compelled him to do something, and he did. He used oil and wine to cleanse and disinfect the man’s wounds, put him on his own donkey, and took him to an inn. He cared for this injured stranger himself, interrupting his own life and schedule, and then paid the innkeeper the equivalent of two days’ wages to take care of the man. If more money was spent, he promised to reimburse the innkeeper next time he came by. And it is the Samaritan who embodies the third of the three life philosophies: “What’s mine is yours, and I’ll share it.” So what’s your life philosophy: “What’s yours is mine, and I’ll take it?”, “What’s mine is mine, and I’ll keep it?”, or “What’s mine is yours, and I’ll share it?” How we answer that question will determine to a great degree how we answer the question of “Who is my neighbor?”

Many of us have the same problem as the lawyer. *We know*, but we don’t *do*. Notice what Jesus says to the lawyer after he answers the question put to him by Jesus: which of the three proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers? He said, “**The one who showed him mercy**” (Luke 10:37). The Samaritan who had compassion also showed mercy. And then Jesus instructed the lawyer: “**You go, and do likewise**” (Luke 10:37). Not just think about it or consider it, but *do it!* We discover who our neighbor is only when we discover that we are a neighbor.

The One who had compassion and showed mercy is not just the Samaritan in the parable, but the Lord Jesus himself. That compassion was and is for you and me; people who know but don’t always do. That compassion of Jesus led to the mercy of all mercies when Jesus proved neighbor to us all and died on the cross. He loved us even unto death, paying the penalty we rightly deserved because of our sin and disobedience. And now He calls us to new life – a life rooted in his own life of compassion and mercy; a life that doesn’t ask, “Who is my neighbor?”, but loves that neighbor as Christ has loved us. God help us to do this for Jesus’ sake. Amen.