

Sunday Sermon July 13, 2025

I love today's parable of the Good Samaritan, even though the priest doesn't do very well, does he? "Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side." It's tough to be a priest when a fellow priest just passed right by the injured man lying in the ditch. Today's a day I'd rather be a lawyer than a priest.

The lawyer gets it right: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" "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." Good answer, Jesus says! Love is what it's all about.

But the lawyer's questions are interesting, aren't they: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" That's a question that might give us pause.

What must I do to inherit? Most often you don't have to do anything to receive an inheritance. It comes as an accident of birth or marriage. It is a gift, just like God's love. Pure gift. There is nothing we can do to earn the gift of God's love. It is simply given to us, freely and fully, and as gift we are called to share it, to live it, to give it away.

The lawyer's second question is equally interesting, he asks: "And who is my neighbor?" It implies that he thinks someone is not a neighbor. The lawyer's thinking some are and some aren't, and Jesus tells a story that proclaim everyone is our neighbor, especially the one in need. We are called to love all and love always.

I say we are "called." I'm not sure saying we are "called" love all and love always is what we are told in today's Gospel. We are not called but commanded. "You shall love the Lord your God." "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." These are commandments, not suggestions... not something to get around to when we have the time or the energy. We can't pick and choose. "You shall love all."

So the priest should have known this, right? Any priest worth his salt should have known the greatest commandment, but he passed by. Why? We are not told, but it could be that he was concerned about what might happen to him if he helped. Maybe it was a trap. The man could have been a decoy, and he was being lured into the ditch where other men would beat and rob him.

Or maybe the priest was concerned about ritual purity. Touching a dead body would make him unclean and prohibit him from temple worship. Jesus is making it clear that love is more important than ritual purity.

Maybe it was as simple as not wanting to be inconvenienced or late.

Maybe he blamed the victim. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was steep and filled with switchbacks that offered perfect hiding places for robbers. Everyone knew you should never travel this road alone. It was the guy's fault.

Or maybe it was just passive acceptance. The priest and the Levite looked at the half-dead man and thought "how sad, but this is just how the world works." People get robbed and beaten. Maybe they said a prayer for him, but they just kept walking.

Passive acceptance of violence happens all the time whether it's war or the gun violence that we see all around us. We can become immune to it. "That's just how the world works." "The price we have to pay..."

The contrast in today's Gospel between these two important, well-respected figures – the priest and the Levite - who somehow justified walking by, and a Samaritan, a disrespected and despised figure who is the one who responds with compassion, could not be more striking. Instead of blaming, accepting, or worrying about what might happen to him if he helped, he asked: what will happen to the wounded stranger if I don't stop and help?

The Samaritan knew the most important thing of all. His job was to love, always, without fear or judgement. And love is a limitless resource. The more you give it away, the more you have to give. You can run out of money and time, but you can never run out of love. Love is what weaves us together into one body, what we Christians call "the Body of Christ."

Thomas Merton said this well when he wrote: "We cannot find ourselves within ourselves, but only in others, yet at the same time before we can go out to others we must first find ourselves. We must forget ourselves in order to become truly conscious of who we are. The best way to love ourselves is to love others..."

This is what our unlikely hero, the Good Samaritan, understood: the man lying in the ditch was a part of him, a brother, to love the wounded man was to love

himself. The Samaritan was “moved with pity” – moved in his guts, so connected was he to the beaten man.

Somehow he hadn’t become desensitized. He didn’t judge or blame. He wasn’t worried about the risk or the cost. He simply reached out with compassion.

The lesson of today’s Gospel is clear. We are called, no, we are commanded to love. Commanded to love God and to love our neighbor, to love the stranger lying in the ditch. And what Jesus is doing in this powerful story is defining what love of neighbor is: the concrete practice of reaching out and caring for others.

And as we do this, something else will happen. As we practice compassion, as we reach out to sisters and brothers beaten down and cast aside, we will question the structures that leave so many people lying in the ditch. We will ask why the Jericho Road is so dangerous and take steps to make it safer.

Dr. King, in reflecting on today’s parable had this to say about the Jericho Road: “A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring...”

Love commands us to reach out to the beaten man lying in the ditch, and also to work to change structures so that we can live in safer and more just and equitable world. Today Jesus reminds us that love is the only thing that will make this happen. Seeing each and every neighbor as a sister or brother and loving them with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength. Loving the way the Good Samaritan and Jesus loved.

Let us pray -

O Lord God, your mercy delights us, and the world longs for your loving care. Hear the cries of people in need, and turn our hearts to love our neighbors with the love of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.