Sometime for me the hardest things to preach about are the ones that are the most familiar. Most people know the story of the Good Samaritan. We’ve heard it so many times that we no longer hear it. Good Samaritan is now synonymous with organizations and people helping others. We have Good Samaritan Hospitals and Churches. We have Good Samaritan ministries, laws, and societies.

What’s interesting and somewhat ironic to me is that in Jesus’ time, the Samaritan wasn’t thought of as good. We might call it the Good Al Qaeda Hospital today. The other interesting point is that Jesus’ story was not simply about helping people in need, though of course that is important, and a common theme in Luke’s Gospel. Jesus’ point is about how we define our neighbor.

Jesus tells this story in response to a question from a lawyer, a scholar of the Torah, the law given to Moses. The lawyer starts off the conversation by asking about inheriting eternal life. When Jesus responds to the question with his own question – what does it say in the Torah, the man can answer easily.

A lawyer knows the law. As a scholar of scripture, he sums up the law in 2 parts “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind.” That comes straight from Deuteronomy 6:5. And the corollary, “and your neighbor as yourself,” is in Leviticus 19:18. His answer receives the equivalent of a gold star from Jesus. (Episcopalians can quote chapter and verse upon occasion!)
But the lawyer can’t leave well enough alone. “And who is my neighbor?” The author of Luke’s Gospel says the man wants to justify himself, presumably seeking to narrow the definition of neighbor to those he already loves as well as he loves himself. At the same time he is categorizing who is in and who is out. If “those people over there” are not his neighbor, well then he’s off the hook.

And here’s where the context matters. Jesus isn’t telling a story about doing good deeds on behalf of others. Jesus is telling a story about who is considered to be a neighbor. For the lawyer a neighbor includes those who share his culture, his religion, his geographical location. It doesn’t include those who are different from him, like say, a Samaritan. Jesus draws no such distinctions.

Now here’s where it’s hard for us to understand the shock of Jesus’ story. Jews in 1st century Palestine had only contempt for Samaritans and vice versa. The details of the conflict are pretty obscure for us to understand. But imagine someone who is your enemy. Imagine a member of the Taliban or Al Qaeda. Imagine someone who has political affiliations you despise. Imagine someone who is the very antithesis of what you hold to be good and true. And that person is the one who helped the wounded and broken victim, while the clergy and the first responders and the scouts, and all the people who you would expect to help, passed on by. The cost was too great for them, whether in time or energy or money. Whatever the reason they didn’t stop, the good guys did not act like good guys. The bad guy turned out to be the good guy.

Don’t you hate it when the bad guy turns out to be the good guy, and you have to reevaluate your judgment?

Jesus tells this story about the Samaritan, someone who was despised but who acts as a neighbor. The religious leaders, those who knew the law about loving God and
loving neighbor as well as the lawyer did, didn’t stop. They might have had very good reasons, but Jesus doesn’t tell us what they are – just that they walked on by. At the end, when Jesus asks which of the characters in the story acted as a neighbor, the lawyer can’t even bring himself to say, “The Samaritan.” Instead, he says, “The one who showed him mercy.” It’s hard to hear a story in which our side turns out to be in the wrong and someone from the other side is the one doing what’s right.

Woe to us when we try to justify ourselves. When we start qualifying and excusing and rationalizing why our thoughts and actions should be perfectly acceptable in the eyes of God, we need to just stop. Because there is no justification for excluding our neighbors, no matter who they are.

The lawyer in the story knows the law. And, interestingly enough, he summarizes the law, all those commandments handed down to Moses, the same way Jesus does: love God and love your neighbor as yourself, which presupposes that you do love yourself. The man actually knows the right answer. Until he’s faced with living that out. And there’s the rub. We can point fingers at the lawyer for trying to justify himself, but don’t we all do that at some point? There’s always some exception to whom we’re called to love, right?

We might be willing to get down in the ditch and help a stranger from another country or religion who was wounded. We might not balk at providing assistance to someone covered in tattoos and piercings with drug paraphernalia lying beside her. We might eagerly assist someone who looks very different from us
But would we do it for a particular president or Congress member or Supreme Court Justice? Would we do it for the neighbor who has the signs in the yard that we can’t stand? Would we do it for a Black Lives Matter Protester or a Proud Boy? Where would we draw the line? And what if we were the person who was vulnerable and wounded – would we accept help from the one we most despise?

For the lawyer, the law is the Gospel, and it is open to his interpretation. Jesus rewrites the story to make the Gospel law.¹ He was the one who laid down his life for all. Those who love him, those who follow him, those who get it wrong, those who get it right, those who betrayed him, those who denied him, those who were part of the children of Israel, those who were grafted on later through their belief in him. He loved his neighbor as God loved him.

That’s the Good News. The Good News that might also be hard news for those of us who like a more narrow definition of neighbor is that in Jesus’ story, there are no limits on who our neighbor is. The Good News might also be difficult for those of us who want to win. The one who wins is the one lying in the ditch. Even when those who should care for him don’t, he is saved in an unexpected way.

If we’re lying in that ditch, Jesus is going to pick us up and care for us. He isn’t going to stop and check our credentials. And he invites us to go and do likewise.

¹ Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3, Pastoral Commentary for Proper 10.