

Samaritan Neighbors

Luke 10:25-37

Cradock Presbyterian Church

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You've heard me say before, that we live under two commandments: Love God entirely and completely, and love your neighbor as you love yourself. You know of course that Jesus said this more than once. Here it is again, in the 10th chapter of Luke. But this passage is different from the others: Here's a guy who wants to *challenge* Jesus on what it means!

Now, let's be clear who this guy is. He's a *lawyer*, and then as now lawyers were self-assured, sometimes self-righteous, people. And oftentimes disliked! This guy knew the Law backwards and forwards; but he wasn't there that day to teach it to anyone. Right there in the first verse, verse 25, we read that he stood up *to test* Jesus. And oh-by-the-way, the word for *test* in the original is the very same word used to describe what Satan was doing with Jesus back there in the desert, back in chapter 4, during the Temptation Story. You think Luke was comparing lawyers to devils? Could be! Most likely, he was pointing up that here was an opportunity for Jesus to curry favor, to win some points with a man in a position of power.

Now, the lawyer, being one who played with words for a living, thought he'd found himself a loophole. Funny thing about loopholes – the people who find them are usually the ones who benefit from them. And this lawyer thought he had found him one here. Indeed, one meaning of the word in the original for “neighbor” is “fellow” - something. Like, “My fellow Americans.” Or “fellow church members.” It's people like you, that's what that meaning is. You have to assume the lawyer thought he was in good shape on

the first part of Jesus' answer. This thing about loving God completely – yeah, he'd done that! He'd dedicated himself to the Law, hadn't he? So that proves how much he loved God – right? And I betcha this lawyer was ready with a list of the "neighbors" he'd done good things for. One commentator suggests that he was trying to soften things because he felt he was deficient in that second area, the one about neighbors. I disagree! I think it was all about showing everybody how *good* he was. Verse 29 makes it clear that he wanted to "justify" himself. What a guy! First he wants to trap Jesus, then he wants to find loopholes, then he seeks to prove how doggone good he is!

I'm afraid that you and I fall into that trap sometimes, that need we feel to prove how good we are. A need to feel that we're justified, that, as that term "justified" really means, we are all right in all of our relationships. And especially in our relationship to God. Do we do that? Do we point out how many good things we've done? – instead of the things we're *going to do*, things that *God* is calling us to do? I've always been glad that we've had a variety of our church people stay overnight with the homeless folks, or go over and feed them dinner. But are they neighbors? Are we their neighbors? Or are we just trying to show that we're "good?"

Jesus must have been a little irked. He couldn't have made things plainer. It's all about de-centering from the self. This lawyer's "loophole" was his belief that his "neighbor" was his fellow Jew, somebody just like him. But the word in the original has a stronger meaning at its root. It's derived from the word for "near," as in being in proximity to you. Why is that important? Because we don't have control over that! And in

fact, *God himself* might put some people “in proximity” to us so that we can do God’s work.

So we take a look at this story that we all know so well. It’s so well known that even people who aren’t Christians know this story, and can recite it accurately. The story starts out innocently enough, a person in a crowd asking Jesus a question. We know it wasn’t an honest question, it was an attempt to trap Jesus. But Jesus ignores the intent; when the lawyer answers, our text has Jesus saying, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." “Right” can mean simply correct; but it also has a moral meaning, as in “doing the right thing.” In the Matthew version, the story ends right here. But Luke knows there’s more. The more I think about it, the more I think this lawyer really was looking for a chance to show off how good he was. Little did he know that he was setting his own trap, a trap that would showcase how far *short* he was of the Kingdom of God.

The “more” Luke gives us is Jesus telling a story about a man traveling down from Jerusalem to Jericho. That road was known for highway robberies; this man who was walking along fell victim as so many others did. So it wasn’t a fairy tale to Jesus’ listeners: it was, as they say, “ripped from the headlines.” You have to assume this man was a Jew, since he had just been to Jerusalem. Those robbers had “laid wounds on him,” in the vivid language of the original. He was not yet dead, but he was dying. He was likely a bloody mess. Now, what do we know about Jews of that day? They avoided being made “unclean” with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. This man needed

medical attention, at least first aid, which would have meant, in some form, touching him. THAT wasn't going to happen!

The original language for what comes next could be translated "As luck would have it," or "by coincidence," the priest came upon this scene. Priests were Temple officials. They had to remain perfectly clean, or else they couldn't perform their duties at the Temple, most of which had to do with offering sacrifices. I always puzzled about why the priest had to pass by on the *other* side of the road. Then another minister friend pointed out that the roads were really narrow; the priest might have been afraid that this man was going to roll over in his death throes and touch him. You get this mental image of him *s-q-u-e-e-e-z-i-n-g* by, hugging the rocks on either side of the road. You probably heard something said, when you were a kid, about how this priest couldn't stop and help, because it would make him late to his duties. That was in our Sunday School literature when we were kids. No, that's not it; besides the fact that he was going the wrong way, away from Jerusalem, this was something much deeper, much more disturbing than worrying about being late: this priest thought that what God wanted from him was to *keep clean so he could do sacrifices later in the Temple!* Really! This same God who had said to the prophet Amos that he hated their sacrifices, and wanted mercy and justice instead. The priest shoulda known. He should have stopped. He *could have* stopped – since he was going away from Jerusalem, he probably wasn't to be on duty for quite a while. But you know what? He would have had to go through a ritual cleansing that was a little lengthy, if he had helped that dying man. How inconvenient! Who knows whether or not the nearly-dead man called out to him; he just kept on

a-walkin'.

Next, along came a Levite, and if you thought priests had a hangup about staying clean, you should meet some of these Levites! Levites were the holy families. *By definition* a Levite was connected to the Temple, and therefore required to be clean. The same things apply to him as to the priest, as far as uncleanness and Temple duties, but there was more here: to this Levite, *he'd damage his own identity* if he stopped and helped! What would his fellow Levites say?

I can't help it, I feel the sting of this part of the story, because the principle applies so much to you and me. We don't do some of the things that we ought to do, because what would the neighbors say? That we're some sort of religious nuts? That we're trying too hard to be "holy joes?" Their Law had those provisions for cleansing in it because God knew, and everyone knew, that sometimes somebody would have to do some nasty things. That's how it is in any society. The sole reason for the priest and the Levite not doing the unclean things is selfishness: "I don't want to be unclean! What a hassle!" What kind of self-imposed "laws" like this do we put on ourselves? And do we ever turn away from what might happen to us, and consider reaching out to somebody we'd rather not reach out to?

Besides the "clean" thing, both the priest and the Levite were going *downhill* from Jerusalem. It wouldn't have been that hard to carry the man. The story doesn't say it, but they might have had donkeys or mules or some such animals with them, just as the hero of our story does. How much effort does it take to save a *FELLOW* human being? How much do you want to give of yourself?

Finally, a Samaritan happened upon the scene. You know about these guys, we've talked about them recently; they were hated by the Jews, for two main reasons: they didn't think Jerusalem was the place for sacrifices to be offered, and they were racially slightly different from the Jews. But get this! – they adhered to the Law as strictly as the Jews did, with the same emphasis on “clean-unclean.” What gets lost in the buzz is that this Samaritan was going to have the same sort of problems with being unclean as the priest and the Levite. So what was different here, that made him stop?

The difference is quite clear to me: he didn't think first of himself, he thought first of the poor victim. Verse 33 is powerful: he was “moved in his bowels,” literally, at the deepest level of his being, filled with compassion for this nearly-dead man. So he did the remarkable. He didn't have the usual things they would have had in a “first-aid kit,” like aloe and myrrh, so he used olive oil and wine, things he had probably brought with him on the journey as provisions. The bandages might have been some of his own clothing that he ripped into strips, since people didn't travel with bandages. And not only that! When he got the wounded man to the inn, he gave the innkeeper *two denarii*, which is about two days worth of their ordinary pay. He said, “Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay on my return.” Surely it didn't cost a full two denarii to take care of the man! This Samaritan had left himself open to being cheated. He didn't care. He was focused on seeing that this man recovered.

Jesus asked the potent question: “Which one was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” Could there be any doubt? I'd love to hear how the lawyer in this story slunk off at the end. He knew now what it meant to be a neighbor, and how

he'd been failing all along. It doesn't have to be that way with us! We are on the other side of the cross now; we have the most powerful example of all of caring, not for the self, but for others. It was displayed for all time on Calvary.

Jesus closed this passage with the admonishment, "Go and do likewise." I say to you that in many ways, in all of your lives, you've had those moments where you've cared for others before self. The reason Luke records this story is to say to us, "Don't stop! Keep caring about others more than self – just as our Lord told us to do." I challenge you today, to look for ways to be like that Samaritan, and to reach out to someone else. If you do, then you will teach the world how to obey our Lord's commandment – and how to bring in God's Kingdom, right here, right now.