

The Neighbor Is the Key

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“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” – Luke 10:25

I have taken as my text for this morning’s sermon one of the five questions found in the best known of Jesus’s parables. It’s the question a lawyer in Jerusalem has put to Jesus to test him. It’s also the question all of us ask of Jesus – or would ask, if we weren’t afraid of his answer: “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

The emphasis of the sentence is on the pronoun – what must **I** do to inherit eternal life? I think the lawyer might have put the emphasis there when he posed the question to Jesus because in the immediately preceding verses in Luke’s gospel, Jesus has told various wanna-be followers what **they** must do if they wish to follow him, and the lawyer may very well have been listening in.

First, they must be prepared, as he is preparing himself, to be put to death for their peaceful way of life and their teachings of God’s mercy and peace. Twice in Luke’s gospel, before we reach today’s reading, Jesus has told his disciples that he must suffer and die because of the way he lives and what he teaches. He teaches something different from what the establishment teaches and he lives in a way that is different from the way ordinary people – that would be you and I – live. This combination will get him killed, and he knows it. Be forewarned, he tells those who would follow him.

Here’s the way he put it: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it” (9:23-24).

Luke puts those words just before the parable of the good Samaritan, and even closer to the parable is a series of warnings about the cost of following Jesus.

Someone said, I will follow you, and Jesus said that he had nowhere to lay his head. Another person wanted to follow Jesus but had family business to attend to first; to him, Jesus said, “Let the dead bury their own dead” (9:60). And to a third wanna-be follower, who wanted a few days of family leave to say good-bye, Jesus said, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (9:62).

Do you see the pattern here? Do you hear what Jesus is saying to those who think they want to be his follower? He’s saying that to live as he lived – to answer the question on the wristbands of a few years ago, What Would Jesus Do? – is harder than you think. It is not easy to follow Jesus. Scripture makes that very clear, but we want it to be otherwise, and so we read Scripture in such a way that following Jesus looks easy, like something anyone can do.

Like helping someone in need. Anyone can do that. You don't have to be a follower of Jesus to help out a fellow traveler. You may recall that on the Fourth of July we experienced a torrential downpour of rain early in the afternoon, and my nephew and niece-in-law and I were caught in it as we drove to see the lighthouse at Fairport Harbor. Somewhere around Mentor, we saw up ahead that a driver had lost control of their vehicle – hydroplaning would have been the likely cause – and the car had skidded into the concrete median separating the six lanes of Route 2. We slowed, of course, and moved to avoid creating a pile-up, and we could see a man running back from his own vehicle a few yards ahead of the crash site, on his way to help. It would be presumptuous to think that the fellow on his way to lend a hand was a follower of Jesus; he might have been, but he might not have been. Jesus never pretended that he or his followers have a corner on the market of mercy.

Anyone can help when a situation calls for it, and the anyone in today's parable is a Samaritan. Why does Jesus specify that it was a Samaritan who helped the person in need?

Because the lawyer who asked how to inherit eternal life didn't like Samaritans. No Jewish person in Jerusalem liked Samaritans because the Samaritans thought they were the true Jews and that the Jews in Jerusalem – the scribes, the Pharisees, and the Saducees as the New Testament frequently refers to them, and today's lawyer – had lost the thread of what it meant to be a follower of Moses. The Samaritans held to the first five books of Moses as the only true scriptures for Jews, and the Jerusalem Jews admitted other books – like Psalms and Proverbs and the prophets – into their canon of Scripture. The Samaritans considered that unfaithful innovating. Jerusalem Jews also said that the sacred mountain was where the temple in Jerusalem was, not Mt. Gerezim, which was the sacred mountain of the Samaritans. The Samaritans didn't approve of that, either. The Jerusalem Jews looked down on the Samaritans as backwater country rubes, and the Samaritans regarded the Jerusalem Jews as apostates who had abandoned the Torah. So there was plenty of mutual distrust and animosity between the Jews from whom the lawyer had come and the Samaritans, one of whom turned out to be the neighbor to the man in the ditch.

And the neighbor is the key to the parable. "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" That's the question Jesus posed to the lawyer in response to the lawyer's question to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

The neighbor is not the one in the ditch. The neighbor is the one beside the ditch. Read the parable again. The neighbor is not the one in need. The neighbor is the Samaritan who helps the one in need. Read the parable again. The neighbor is not the one we feel good about helping. The neighbor is the one who gets on our last nerve, the one we think is wrong, the one who threatens our sense of religious superiority because they experience God differently. The neighbor is the Samaritan. Read the parable again.

What did the lawyer want? Eternal life. What did he have to do to get it? Love God above all else and love his neighbor as he loved himself. Who was his neighbor? The Samaritan, the one he preferred to hate.

Go thou and do likewise.