

The Good Neighbor – Luke 10

Hello friends,

My sermon today is based upon a longer series of talks I will share at a church retreat, therefore this is a kind of a shortened version of what I hope to be a longer exploration.

I am Chinese, and although I don't remember where I heard this, I remember someone once told me that if you want to test if a Chinese chef has real talent, you do not order the "special" dish from the menu, you order the simple stuff, like noodle soup, fried rice, simple Chinese vegetables. Because it is easy to make something you invent taste good, there's nothing to compare it to. But to make a dish that everyone knows how to make, and to do it with distinction, requires a deep knowledge and expertise in cooking.

In the passage we have just read, we see a teacher of the law testing Jesus with a question, the most basic of questions, and of course, Jesus gives him the correct answer. I suspect that those of us who have grown up in church, or have any experience with church, would not find it too difficult to give the same answer. And Jesus understands this as well, for he turns the question back on the lawyer, who is also able to answer correctly. Love God, and love others. Obviously. Okay, we can go to prayer now.

No? Not satisfied? Well you're not alone. The lawyer is not satisfied. He feels cheated. He is like someone who asked a chef how to make fried rice, and the reply he got was that you cook some rice and then fry it.

In the history of interpretation of this passage, the lawyer has gotten a bad rap. And for good reason. The teachers of the law have repeatedly opposed and tested Jesus, and no doubt his desire to "justify himself", as the text tells us, is motivated by a frustration at not being able to best Jesus. Even so, I am sympathetic to the lawyer. 'Say something meaningful, Jesus!' And of course Jesus has, just not in the way that we anticipated.

But as often happens, when you try to expose Jesus, Jesus exposes you. He cuts to the heart of the matter, to the real question beneath the question. Because, beneath the lawyer's question is an awareness, a deep awareness that we bury deep - the awareness that this commandment demands something of us most of us are not willing to give. The awareness that anyone can SAY the commandment, maybe even explain it, but to actually DO the commandment, to LIVE it, is something else entirely.

In pushing the question further, the lawyer reveals two things. First, he reveals his intuition, his perceptiveness, that there is more to the question than meets the eye. This is perhaps the more admirable trait. But second, this intuition leads him to perceive the discrepancy between the implications of the commandment and his own life. So he seeks a way to reconcile the two, to justify himself, for it is already becoming clear to him that he stands under judgement.

Therefore, we must begin our exploration of the parable not with an emphasis on what it means to love your neighbor, but with what it means to NOT love your neighbor, for our actions reveal our true values, our true beliefs.

So let us take a look at the first two examples in the parable. They are a priest and a Levite; religious authorities and keepers and teachers of the law. No doubt the lawyer in the parable would count himself among their company. And we are faced with an uncomfortable question: why do these men, who claim such dedication to obeying God's law, fail such a simple test?

There are contextual clues. If the man by the side of the road were really dead instead of just half dead, then coming in contact with him would make the helper ceremonially unclean. If the priest or the Levite were going up to Jerusalem to perform religious duties, coming in contact with a dead body would make them ceremonially unclean and mean they would need to go through a long purification process. The robbers could be nearby, and helping the man could have meant putting themselves at risk. Or, if the man by the side of the road was a Gentile or a Samaritan that would have meant getting close to a person considered an enemy.

So helping would have been inconvenient and costly, and would have meant changing their pre-conceived notions of other people.

And so, knowing the commandment, we do the only thing possible; we redefine who is my neighbor. That is the heart of the lawyer's question, and Jesus' response. What the lawyer, the Levite, and the priest show is that when we don't want to be inconvenienced, take risks, take the cost, face the uncomfortable situation of helping people we may not like, we redefine who our neighbor is. In choosing not to help a person in need, we have defined them to be "not-my-neighbor". This rationalizes, or excuses us, from running from the commandment.

So let us turn to the good Samaritan.

It becomes clear, through his actions, that he is obedient to the commandment.

The Samaritan, though of a religious and cultural background that was despised by the Jews, shows the understanding of what it means to be a good neighbor.

First, he was moved with compassion. What do the two commandments have in common? Love, for God. And, for others. That is the focus, that is the fundamental characteristic of God, and the person obedient to Him.

Second, it says, he went to him. Love is not just an emotion. Love is not having good intentions. Love is action that flows from that feeling. Love takes the risk of moving out to the other person. The Samaritan views the same risks that the Levite and the priest saw but were not willing to take. It could greatly inconvenience him, it could put him in danger, yet he chooses to act based on his compassion, in the face of those fears.

Third, he acts in practical care. The action is other-centered, not self-centered. He does not love this man to fulfill a certain obligation, or for a reward, whether from God or from others. He demonstrates this by willing to be inconvenienced by the man and does everything he can to care for him.

In wrapping up, I believe the best takeaway I can offer is this: when I was preparing for this sermon, I thought that this passage would be too well known, but it is precisely because it is so familiar that we need to hear it again.

Practically, as I was preparing this sermon this week, there have been numerous times when I would feel like I was in a groove and yet I would be interrupted by someone that needed my help – Dr. Mary Lou and many others. Each time I would grow frustrated at the inconvenience, and then instantly feel convicted, demonstrating how close I am to the lawyer and how far I am from the Samaritan. Let us search our hearts, so that Jesus may lead us to a genuine obedience and love in Him that demonstrates itself in action – sometimes costly action.

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