

Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity: Luke 10:25–37

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A priest, a Levite, a Samaritan. Three men had an open window of opportunity to be neighbor to the man who fell among thieves on the road to Jericho.

Which one is not like the other two? The priest and Levite are clergy, religious leaders, pillars of their community. The Samaritan is a nobody, an anonymous Joe on the road. A Samaritan, despised by Judaeans and Galileans alike who considered Samaritans to be half-breeds and heretics. They wouldn't greet him on the road or talk to him at the town well. He's not like the other two. The genius of this parable is that it forces a religious Jew, a synagogue lawyer, an expert in the intricacies of Torah, to identify with this Samaritan. You can almost hear the resigned reluctance in the lawyer's voice when he has to answer Jesus' question – Who was neighbor to the man who fell among thieves?

The parable comes at the end of an exchange of questions between the lawyer and Jesus. The first is a probing question: "Teacher, Rabbi, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The lawyer asked this in order to test Jesus. He already knows the answer. He's an expert in this. His job was to catalogue what one must do to keep Torah, to inherit life, to bring the kingdom of God. He's asking Jesus in order to test Him, to see if this rabbi from Nazareth makes the grade. This is not a question of curiosity or an honest inquiry of a troubled soul, but a theological interrogation. Did Jesus meet the standards for doctrinal purity?

"What is written in the Torah," Jesus asks, turning the tables on his inquisitor. "How do you read it?" In typical rabbinic style, Jesus answers a question with His own question. He won't be tested, but He will examine His examiner. This should teach you something. Don't expect answers to your questions from Jesus. Rather expect questions that will bore straight into your heart and expose your soul.

"Love God, love your neighbor," is the lawyer's answer. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind – your whole being. And love your neighbor as yourself." He is correct, and Jesus approves. The whole Law can be

summarized in two simple commandments: Love God, love your neighbor. Or just one word – Love. “Love is the fulfilling of the Law.”

“Do this, and you will live.” Love, and you will live. Question asked, question answered. What must you do? Love wholeheartedly. Love God with your whole being; love your neighbor as you love yourself. Love, and you will live. Love God and neighbor, and you will inherit eternal life. Any more questions?

Yes, there is. A second question, this time not to test Jesus but to justify himself. A cross-examining question. A clarifying question. Who is my neighbor? Define neighbor. The person next door? My bowling buddies? Samaritans? Surely not Samaritans. They may live next door, geographically speaking, but no Israelite would consider them “neighbor.” Who is my neighbor? I need to know if I am commanded to love him.

The self-justifying question reveals the heart of this Torah theologian. He is not interested in love but legalistic loopholes, dogmatic definitions and categorical distinctions intended to get the conscience off the hook. For him, love is an obligation, a duty, a law. Define neighbor narrowly enough, and you can do the Law. Leave neighbor undefined, and the Law becomes an untamed beast.

We can catch ourselves at the same self-justifying game. The old Adam is a great synagogue lawyer, always trying to make a case for himself. The conscience is ever busy with its legal chatter, either accusing or making excuses. “Pastor, is it a sin if I...?” “Can a man divorce his wife, a woman her husband, for cause....? For any cause?” “Is it a sin if we love each other....?” If you have to ask, you already have your answer. Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin, whether you can find chapter or verse in your King James bible.

The game is bargaining, attempting to negotiate the Law down to a manageable size, striking a deal with the prosecuting attorney before the case goes to trial. You and I are experts in this game. We have the Law, not only written upon our hearts in the hardwiring of our humanity, but also written in the Scriptures, both old and new testaments. And no matter how clear the Word may be, we are always looking for the loophole, the exception, the caveat, that little crack of self-justification where we can plead our case.

This is where the parable of the man who fell among the thieves comes in. It shuts the loopholes and silences the self-justifying question.

There is a man in a ditch at the side of the road naked, bleeding, and for all intents and purposes dead. He's been beaten nearly to death and robbed. A priest and his levitical assistant see him and immediately walk around as far as possible so as not to even get near him. They were bound by the Law, the same Law that says to love God and love your neighbor prevented them from coming near to that man in the ditch. If he were dead, and they touched him, they would be ritually unclean and would return to their village with a lot of explaining to do as to why they had to undergo an expensive ritual cleansing. The Law tied their hands – damned if you do, damned if you don't. Cornered. That's what the Law will do to you. And so they take the safe, least of all evils road of purity (the religious are always worried about purity). Rather than soil their priestly robes with that man's blood, they walk in the opposite ditch on the other side of the road.

How many times have you walked right behind them, following in their footsteps? I have, all too many times. Averting my eyes, justifying my decision not to get involved, avoiding any engagement, even as the images of that man haunt me at night. You have them too. You have your neglected neighbors, your sins of intentional omission, your self-justified sins where you failed to love but could boast that you kept your tidy little ethical system intact. We walk by that man in the ditch and then gone home to rage about the crime problem on Facebook. Some have even callously posed for a selfie with that man in the ditch and posted it on Instagram. It's happened.

The Samaritan was not like the other two because he was a free man. First of all, he was a layman, not a priest or Levite, just some ordinary schmoe on a donkey. Second, he was a Samaritan, and while they too had laws of purity and cleanliness, this Samaritan didn't seem to care much about ritual purity. He got off his donkey, got down into the ditch, cleansed the man's wounds with oil and wine, bandaged them, put him on his donkey, took him to the local inn, left a couple of days' wages to cover the tab and promised to cover any extra expenses when he returned.

He was not like the other two; he was dead to his own life, his own purity, his own safety. Dead to them all. And all that mattered in that moment of opportunity was that man in the ditch who fell among the thieves. He didn't need a Law to tell him what to do. And he wasn't doing it to inherit eternal life or bring the kingdom of God or merit God's favor. He was just being neighbor to a man in need.

The Law can't make good Samaritans. We may have laws to protect them from liability, but there is no law that can make them. The Law can only make religious priests and Levites preoccupied with their own purity, and synagogue lawyers who treat the Torah of God like a legal codebook. The Law can't quiet your conscience that keeps you up at night with all those visions of men in the ditch that you ignored. The Law can only feed the conscience as it stirs up the thoughts and feelings that seek to define you and isolate you from God. The Law can command love but it can't produce it.

Parables sometimes leave loose ends at the closing credits, a few crumbs to snack on after the movie is over. What do you suppose happened to those two men who met in a ditch on the road to Jericho? What did the Samaritan tell his wife when he got home about how he just spent two days' wages to help some Jew in a ditch at the side of the road? And what about that man who fell among thieves? Do you think he ever thought the same of Samaritans again? Do you think he ever uttered another slur against them? Do you think he talked with them on the road and at the well after that? You never forget undeserved kindness and mercy.

Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? Which of those three do you want to be in the world? That's the question that God poses to you every time that window of opportunity cracks open, every time God puts someone in the ditch of your road.

Old Adam would rather be the priest and levite, ritually pure, legalistically righteous, justified in his loopholes, safe in his hermetically sealed world. But the new man in Christ, you as you are in Christ and Christ in you, is a Samaritan – despised by the world, and dead to the world, free to be neighbor to the man who fell among thieves, reckless in love and mercy, as reckless as God is in His mercy.

Christ became neighbor to us. He reached down to us for His place of glory. He got off His donkey and bent down into the ditch of our Death. He met us in the mire of our Sin. He washed and bandaged our wounds, the wounds others have inflicted on us and the ones we have inflicted on ourselves. He brought us to the inn of His church, a place of sanctuary and healing. Jesus was neighbor to us in our need, beaten by the Law, left bloodied and broken in the ditch. He became our neighbor, God with us.

You go, and do likewise.

Go and do likewise, not out of legal duty but in reckless Samaritan freedom.

There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Christ is the end of the Law for all who believe.

Go and do likewise, knowing that you have been crucified with Christ, and you no longer live but Christ lives in you, and it is Christ who bends down to love your neighbor through you.

Go and do likewise, knowing that as often as you have done it to the least of these beaten, bloodied strangers in the ditch, you have done it to Christ who is hidden in that man who fell among the thieves.

Go and do likewise, not in order to inherit eternal life but because eternal life is yours in Christ, and you have nothing to lose.

In the name of Jesus.

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SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "Luke 10:25-37 (5 Pentecost 2019, Proper 10C)", posted 2019-07-15 (<https://htlcms.org/2019/07/luke-1025-37-5-pentecost-2019-proper-10c/>).