

Won't you be my neighbor Luke 10:25-37 5th Sun. After Pentecost Jul. 14, 2019

Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."

But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Luke 10:25-27 Won't you be my neighbor

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we are familiar with the text today, the parable of the Good Samaritan. We've read it often, it is one of our favorite parables. We are comfortable with it. It's kind of like putting on a comfortable cardigan and a pair of comfortable sneakers. And we can sing right along with Mr. Rogers, "It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood... Won't you be my neighbor?" We can read the words of God that the lawyer quotes that set the stage for the parable, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." And we think to ourselves how pretty. How poetic. We might even have them hanging on a cross-stitch pattern in our house. And then we can pass by it to get to the parable. And we tend to say we do pretty good with the parable. While not perfect, we have worked on race relations - we have the great American melting pot. We mostly don't hold people ethnicity against them -and we don't have the animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans. We have learned that everyone is our neighbor, Each can say, "I am kindly disposed toward everyone, I am not prejudiced," and move on to something new. But we are a little fast if we think all God is saying is we should be able to say won't you be my neighbor to everyone. So let's go back to the beginning.

The lawyer asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life." He is testing Jesus. I don't know if he is checking if Jesus has special knowledge just for him, or if he is asking to see if Jesus will say something he can attack. But Jesus answer is surely a disappointment - What does the law say? How do you read it?" There is no special knowledge here, no statements to consider. Even schoolchildren know this. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." And rather than commending him and telling him to do only one other thing, as Jesus did with the rich man, Jesus tells this lawyer, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you shall live."

What a letdown. No special message. Nothing to attack. Do this and you shall live. What kind of answer is that?

And maybe it is too hard of one. The lawyer knew the law. But who can love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind? who can love neighbor as yourself? It is hard enough to love God with our voices, with our hands and feet. And if we try hard, we can get to church or make a meal for the needy or help flood victims. But how often even then our heart is elsewhere. How often we are counting our cost instead of our need to help those God loves. How often we try to say we have done enough, we have done our part - let someone else do the rest. Or we resent those who fail to do as much as we have, and show we love ourselves more than God or that neighbor? How often we would rather leave this command hanging on a wall looking pretty instead of applying it to our lives, because our lives don't look pretty when held up against it. It is a lot like an outfit that looks good on in or on a mannequin, it has a cute pattern or striking lines, but it just doesn't look right on us. -it show off our imperfections.

Our sinful selves say its better to try something else. We might talk about the weather or politics instead - they are safer. But the lawyer is more cunning than that. To Justify himself -when faced by his utter

sinfulness - he tries to change the subject without seeming to change the subject - who is my neighbor. And we are ready to sing "Won't you be my neighbor?", along with him, because it is safer - anything instead of facing our utter failure to love God and our neighbor.

So Jesus tells the tale of the good Samaritan. And you know it. But we are used to having good food, good friends, good days. We use good a lot more than Jesus would. He says no one is good but God alone. So to make the point, maybe we should call this the unbelievable good Samaritan. A man is beaten, stripped, bleeding, half-dead. Two people, a priest and a Levite pass by who know the law, who are covered by it, who are experts. But it doesn't extend to their hands and feet, much less to their heart. They pass by on the other side. But Samaritan - one rejected by those who know better - stops and helps. And more than helps. He binds the wounds uses oil and wine, puts the man on a donkey, takes him to an inn, and pays for his care and his extended care. I don't know about you, but I have to work to say a prayer when an ambulance goes by -and that isn't much more than passing by on the other side. And I can say I don't know how to help - but that does not excuse me - it means I should learn. When Jesus asks who was neighbor to the man who fell among robbers - we know who it was not. It wasn't the priest and it wasn't the Levite. It was the one who had abundant mercy, who gave of himself.

And that is not you and is not me. It isn't even the one I aspire to be. My wife and I read books with book club, and a question I have is the theme - what does it try to teach me, what message does it have. There is not always only one - but sometimes some are so obvious they hardly need to be stated. Some sound like statements in favor of motherhood and apple pie. But in great books, they go further. If we say the theme of this story is that everyone is your neighbor, that is true but a little obvious. Consider if it says that we should love even our enemies to where we give our time our treasure our very lives like the Samaritan in caring for them. And doing it for the joy set before you. That is loving the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. That is loving your neighbor as yourself

The only one who loves God and his neighbor like that is Jesus. Who loved us even when we became the enemies of God. Who traveled our ways and bound our wounds and gives us healing, who carries us lost sheep home on his own shoulders, who gives us a church and pastors to care for us till we return. That is our unbelievably good Samaritan.

And he bids us testify to us. As we believe he has saved us completely in our depravity, we are to testify not only with what we know but with our hands and feet, heart and soul. Care for your neighbor. Care for their souls and tell them of Jesus. Care for your neighbor. Help them in every need.