

COMPASSION AND LOVE

Luke 10:25-37

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

July 14, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 10, verses 25 through 37. It is on page 735 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus tells a parable to answer the questions of how we inherit eternal and who our neighbor is. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 10, beginning at verse 25, we read in Jesus' name.

²⁵ And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" ²⁷ 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." ²⁸ And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."

²⁹ But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰ Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

This parable teaches compassion and love. Compassion and love are related to each other, but they are not the same thing. Compassion, at least the way the Bible uses it, is a feeling, while love is an action. Compassion is a feeling of deep pity. It's like when you see a child suffering, and you feel it in your gut. It kind of feels like nausea or a cramp. You're not sick, but you have such pity that you feel it in your gut. I suppose God gave us the feeling of compassion because it often leads us to actions of love. Love, at least the way the Bible uses it, is not a feeling, but an action. It means putting another person's interests ahead of your own, even at great sacrifice to yourself. And the greatest kind of love is not love for those who love you, but love for those who despise you. To have compassion and love for your enemies is the greatest kind of compassion and love.

COMPASSION AND LOVE (Luke 10:25-37)

The parable of the Good Samaritan has to be one of the most broadly known passages of the entire Bible. What I mean is, people outside the Church are far more likely to know something about the Good Samaritan than they are to know about the parables of the sower, or the persistent widow, or the wicked tenants, or pretty much any other parable. We even have laws and nursing homes named after the Good Samaritan.

The parable of the Good Samaritan has an ethical example that appeals to people across the religious spectrum. Someone might be an atheist or a Buddhist, or maybe they don't even care about religion, but if you use the term "Good Samaritan" they probably have some idea of what you're talking about. To them a Good Samaritan is someone who stops to help a stranger in need. It might be a motorist on the side of the road. It might be a panhandler on the corner, and you give them a sandwich or a few bucks. It might just be someone who dropped their groceries, and oranges are rolling all over the parking lot, so you help pick them up. It could also be something more critical, like giving CPR to a complete stranger.

Sometimes being a Good Samaritan involves risk on your part. You don't know if you might get sick giving CPR to someone. The person in the stranded car might be waiting to rob you. The person you try to help might not want your help and sue you for some reason. That's why we have Good Samaritan laws to protect people who are genuinely trying to help another person. Being a Good Samaritan isn't just about sacrificing a little bit of your time. Sometimes it means risking your life for a complete stranger. That's what it means to be a Good Samaritan. It means that you stop what you're doing and help someone you don't know.

This ethical lesson appeals to all sorts of people across the religious spectrum, not because we are this kind of person, but because we like to think that we could be. *If the conditions are just right, and I'm really not in that big of a hurry, I could be a hero. And maybe there would be a TV camera to catch it all, or people would film it with their phones, and it would go viral, and I would be an inspiration to America.* This is what appeals to so many about the parable of the Good Samaritan.

And Jesus does intend it to be a good example to us. At the end he says, "**You go, and do likewise**" (10:37). But the meaning is really much deeper. We want to pay attention to the details, because sometimes the Jesus is in the details. When we pay attention to the context and think about the historical setting, something more emerges from the Good Samaritan.

The parable flows out of a theological discussion Jesus was having with a lawyer. And when the Bible calls him a lawyer, it doesn't mean the same as what we usually think of as a lawyer. It means that he was an expert in the Old Testament law. It would be better for us to think of him as an Old Testament scholar.

So this scholar asks Jesus a question in order to test him: "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life" (10:25). Now what could be more important than that? When we compare our limited years in this life to eternity in the next, we quickly realize that what we will eat, where we will live, and what we will do in this life is of little consequence. Forget all that stuff, at least for a moment, "What shall we do to inherit eternal life?"

This question is the first of many details that will help us to rightly understand the Good Samaritan. Jesus knows the importance of this question, and he's not going to leave this conversation before he gives the best answer. But he's going to take a round-about path to it.

He starts by turning the question back on the lawyer: "**What is written in the Law? How do you read it?**" (10:26). And the lawyer shows his worth with a correct answer: "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” (10:27). It’s kind of funny; the lawyer came to test Jesus, but all Jesus had to do was flip the question back on him. The guy is so proud of his theological learning that he couldn’t resist answering his own question. And Jesus affirms his answer: **“You have answered correctly, do this, and you will live”** (10:28).

Jesus’ response might make good Lutherans uncomfortable. He just told this guy that if he keeps these two commandments, he will inherit eternal life. But our confession, based firmly upon Scripture, is that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. This seems like a contradiction.

The solution is in the distinction between Law and Gospel. Here is the promise of the Law: *If you love God with your whole everything, and if you love your neighbor as yourself, you will inherit eternal life.* This is true: **“Do this, and you will live.”** The problem, of course, is that none of us actually do this. “Since the fall into sin, no man can perfectly keep the law” (Sverdrup, *Explanation of Luther’s Small Catechism*, q. 15). The problem is not with the doctrine of the Law. The Law works. The problem is with us. We do not love God with our whole everything, and we do not love our neighbors as ourselves. We haven’t, we don’t, and we won’t.

And the lawyer seems to know this somewhere in his conscience, because he asks Jesus’ a follow-up question: “And who is my neighbor?” (10:29). This question is the next detail we want to remember. He needs Jesus to make the law attainable. He needs Jesus to define his neighbor in such a way that he is capable of keeping this commandment.

We usually think of the Jews during Jesus’ day as being very legalistic. And that’s sort of true, but it helps to understand why they were so legalistic. They seem legalistic because they added a whole bunch of commandments to what God had already given. It seems like they were making the Law even harder to keep. But that’s not why they added commandments. They added commandments as explanations of how to keep the Law. They were really trying to make the Law attainable. Instead of raising the bar, they were actually lowering it. And this is what the lawyer wants Jesus to do when he asks, “And who is my neighbor?” He wants Jesus to define “neighbor” in such a way that it limits the scope and makes the commandment attainable. But Jesus won’t do it. Instead, he defines the lawyer’s neighbor as someone repulsive.

Jesus tells a parable to accomplish this. And the parable really answers both the man’s questions. It teaches him who his neighbor is, but it also answers his former question: “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” As we think about the parable, it will help us to think about it through the ears of the lawyer. And we especially want to ask, *Where does the lawyer find himself in the parable?* When we identify the character whom the lawyer identifies with, we will see the point Jesus was making.

It starts with a man going from Jerusalem to Jericho. This was a well-travelled road in the heart of Judea. This is another significant detail. The parable takes place in Judea. Jerusalem and Jericho were about twelve miles apart. This road would have also been used by any Jew from Galilee who was traveling to Jerusalem and did not want to go through Samaria.

Both Galilee and Judea were Jewish regions, but they were separated by Samaria. Jews and Samaritans did not like each other. They were both of Hebrew descent, but about seven hundred years earlier, the Samaritans intermarried with foreigners. The Jews considered this extremely scandalous. They viewed Samaritans had half-breeds. So they despised the Samaritans, and the Samaritans returned the favor. Now the Jews who lived in Galilee had to travel south to Jerusalem for the major feasts. They did this three times a year. But if they didn’t want to pass through Samaria—and they often didn’t—they would go around Samaria and follow the Jordan

River south. Then they would enter Judea from the east side, and this would take them through Jericho on the way to Jerusalem. So this road from Jerusalem to Jericho was often used by Jews in order to avoid Samaritans. It would have been extremely rare to find a Samaritan on this road.

So the first man in the story, the one who fell into the hands of robbers, would have been a Jew. And he needs help. He was robbed, stripped, beaten, and left for dead.

At this point the story seems predictable. The half-dead man in the ditch is the neighbor, and Jesus is going to tell the lawyer to love him. The lawyer expects to identify with whoever it is who stops to help him.

The first two people down the road are a priest and a Levite. These are also both Jews, and not just any Jews, but those involved in the work of the temple. But they don't stop to help the half-dead man. I suppose they don't want to risk anything. Perhaps he is actually a robber, disguised as someone in need. Or he might die on them when they stop to help. This would be inconvenient, because it would make the priest or Levite ceremonially unclean for touching a dead body. Then they would have to go through a time of cleansing before they can go back to work. Stopping to help this guy could be dangerous or inconvenient.

So then the lawyer expects the third person to be a Jewish lay person. That would be someone he can identify with. Then the lawyer can be the hero in the story, and he will learn that he can inherit eternal life by loving those in need.

But that's not what happens. The story takes an unexpected, and even scandalous, twist. The third person down the road is a Samaritan. What is a Samaritan doing on this road from Jerusalem to Jericho? This is not his home turf. People use this road to avoid people like him. He does not belong here.

But the Samaritan stops. **“When he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ ”** (10:33-35). This is most unexpected. It's enough of a shock to see a Samaritan on this road, but for him to be the one who finally stops and loves the man, that is another level of surprise.

And notice this: not only does the Samaritan give him emergency care, but he pledges to provide for all of his care. This is above and beyond. Suppose you save someone's life, you get them to a hospital, and you consider your job done. You've already done a great deal of good for the person. You can go your way with a clear conscience. You can even feel good about yourself. No one expects more from you. You don't go to the billing office and tell them to charge you for this stranger's expenses. But that is what the Good Samaritan does. It's a remarkable and unexpected display of compassion and love.

So now the lawyer has to rethink the entire parable. It didn't go where he expected it to go. He expected the half-dead man to be the neighbor, and for himself to be the hero who loves him. But the hero is a Samaritan, and he can't identify with the Samaritan. So the only person left for the lawyer to be is the half-dead man. He didn't expect it to go this way, but that's the only place to find himself in the parable. And Jesus drives this home when he asks one final question: **“Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?”** (10:36). This is the last significant detail.

Remember, the discussion beforehand was about loving your neighbor, and the lawyer asked, “And who is my neighbor?” So we expect Jesus to ask, “Which of the three loved his neighbor

as himself.” But Jesus reframes the discussion and completely flips the meaning of the parable. Instead, it’s, “Which of these three ... proved to be a neighbor.” By asking the question this way, Jesus forces the lawyer to realize that the Good Samaritan is his neighbor, and he is the half-dead man.

So the lawyer can’t earn eternal life by loving his neighbor when he, himself, is the half-dead man. Instead of *earning* eternal life it must be *given* as a gift.

And as we listen to this parable, we should come to the same conclusion. We do not get to be the heroes. We are just like the lawyer. We play the part of the half-dead man. We are robbed, stripped, beaten, and left for dead.

Now what does it mean for us to be robbed, stripped, beaten, and left for dead?

Sometimes you might feel this way. Maybe some bad things have happened to you. I won’t even try to guess what they might be, but you know what they are. The circumstances of your life have really beaten you up.

Or maybe you feel the weight of your sin. You’re like the lawyer in the story. You know what God has commanded you to do, but you’re just not capable of doing it. The devil has used God’s Law to beat you up.

Or maybe you don’t even realize how sick you are. You think you’re doing pretty well. But it’s not really about how you feel. It doesn’t really matter if you feel like a dirty, rotten sinner. What matters is that Jesus says you are, and he has compassion on you. The parable exposes our pitiful condition, but more importantly it reveals the one who has compassion on us.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is really about Jesus. Jesus is the Good Samaritan. He is the one who was despised because of his questionable birth. His mother was Jewish, but his Father was ... something else. He wasn’t exactly a Samaritan, but those who thought they knew about his conception treated him the same way.

And the world as whole—which includes all of us—despised him. He came among us. He came to earth—a place we didn’t expect to see him. He became one of us, but he was still different; he was without sin. He is not like us, and we hated him for it. But this did not stop him from loving us. He felt compassion for us. It’s normal to feel compassion for a wounded child. But Jesus had compassion on a world that hates him. He looked upon us in pity, and he loved us. He paid the price for our healing. “By his wounds we are healed” (Is. 53:5).

And so he comes. He sees you. He has compassion. He treats and bandages your wounds. He sets you on his own animal. He takes you to an inn and takes care of you. He pays for you there. He even writes a blank check. He says, “Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay when I come back” (10:35). This is the boundless love of Jesus to you.

It’s not about you doing something to inherit eternal life. It’s not about you loving your neighbor as yourself. It’s about Jesus having compassion for you and loving you with his precious blood.

Then, after he has delivered you from death, he says, “You go, and do likewise.” Jesus is your Good Samaritan. He has compassion for you. He loves you. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.