

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Luke 10:25-37

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

July 10, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 10, verses 25 through 37. 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.

The Good Samaritan is Jesus.

Other times when I've preached on this parable, I've tried to kind of keep you in suspense and take you through the same experience of discovery that Jesus took this lawyer through, or at least that Jesus tried to take this lawyer through. We don't really know if this man understood what Jesus was teaching him.

And that's actually part of the purpose of parables. Parables are a roundabout way of saying something. And Jesus especially used them to hide things from the wise and understanding and reveal them to little children (Luke 8:10; 10:21). But it's not really that Jesus is against those who are wise, but those who think they are wise. It's really an issue of pride or humility. To those who think themselves wise, Jesus hides himself in parables. But to those who seek wisdom, Jesus reveals himself in parables.

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The parable of the Good Samaritan is a good example of this, because it can easily be understood in two different ways, depending on what a person thinks of themselves. To those who think themselves strong or righteous, they find an opportunity to be the hero or the savior of the story. But to those who know themselves to be weak and sinful, they find a Savior in it. We read it differently, depending on what we think we need.

It all depends on where you see yourself in the parable. Let's think about this. There are a few options. Maybe you see yourself in the robbers. If such is the case, you should stop beating people up and taking their stuff. But most people do not see themselves in the robbers.

Maybe you see yourself in the priest or the Levite, who saw the victim, but went out of their way to avoid him. Maybe you can think of a time you have ignored someone in need.

Maybe you see yourself in the Samaritan, the hero of the story. This is how the wise and strong read this parable. And this is the way the parable is most often understood in our current era of radical individualism. We like to see ourselves as heroes, or at least potential heroes if we are given the right opportunity. We like to think that if the opportunity occurs, we would be like the Samaritan. We could be heroes. Maybe you would get on the six o'clock news. Or maybe someone would capture it on video and you could be a YouTube hero. But in reality, we have probably let hundreds or even thousands of service opportunities go by, thinking, *That one's not for me*. Maybe some of these were big opportunities. But most of them are quite small. They're so small that we don't even notice them, or we don't think they're worthy of our time. But if we're not willing to help people in little ways, why would we think that we'll be heroes when the big opportunity presents itself? This reveals something about us: we're not really interested in helping people; we just want to be heroes.

The last option is the first person in the story: the man who was robbed and left for dead. And I saved this one for last, because this is the right place to see ourselves. This is the hardest place to see ourselves, because we don't want it to be true. We want to be the heroes of the story, and if we can't be the heroes, then maybe we're okay with being the villains, preferably the priest or Levite instead of the robbers. Because, if we're the villains, we can just switch our behavior and start acting like the hero instead. But the victim? We don't see ourselves there, because there's nothing for the victim to do. He can't become the hero. And we're not willing to accept that this truly represents our condition before the real Good Samaritan. But this is the right place to see ourselves.

Those who think themselves strong, wise, or good, do not see themselves here. They see themselves in the Good Samaritan. There are several details in the text that preclude us from identifying with the Good Samaritan, but the nature of pride is to not notice these details. It's like the kid in school who thinks he already knows everything, so he doesn't learn anything. When we think we are wise, we don't pay much attention to the parable, because we think we already know it. This is how Jesus hides things from those who think they are wise, while revealing his truth to those who seek his wisdom.

If we understand this parable rightly, we're going to find ourselves in the same place the lawyer found himself, or at least the place he should have found himself. And the lawyer could not identify with the Samaritan. The lawyer would have seen himself as the hero of the story, right up until he heard the word "Samaritan."

Before we get to the parable itself, we should observe a few things in the introduction. First, this lawyer was testing Jesus. Sometimes other teachers would test Jesus in a hostile way, trying

to catch him in something they could use against him. But that's not necessarily the case here. I think it's more likely that this lawyer is just trying to size Jesus up. Pastors often do this to each other when they first meet. Some are more subtle than others, but I'm pretty sure we all do it. We ask a few questions to try to figure out what the other guy is like.

The lawyer asks two questions. First, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (10:26). This is critical to remember throughout the entire parable. It's really what the whole parable is about, how to inherit eternal life. Whatever else Jesus does with this parable, one thing he will certainly do is answer this question.

But Jesus needs to set him up for it. So he answers with a question: "What is written in the Law?" (10:26). The lawyer summarizes the Law in two commands. First, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart ... soul ... strength, and ... mind. Second, love 'your neighbor as yourself'" (10:27). This is a really good summary of the Law. On a separate occasion, Jesus summarizes it the exact same way (Matt. 22:37-40). So Jesus says to the lawyer, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live" (10:28).

This answer might make good Lutherans a little uncomfortable. Jesus just told this guy he can earn eternal life by keeping these two commandments. That sounds like salvation by works ... because it is. And it's true. If you keep both of these commandments perfectly, you will earn eternal life, and God would be very pleased to let you into heaven. The problem with this system is not in the doctrine. The problem is in us. We don't obey these commandments. We do not love God with our whole everything, and we do not love our neighbors as ourselves.

The lawyer seems to know this. Somewhere in his conscience, there is a sting. So he asks a follow-up question: "And who is my neighbor?" 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. If this neighbor is his wife, his children, or his best friend, then maybe he can pull this off. He needs Jesus to make it attainable. But Jesus won't do it. Instead, he defines the lawyer's neighbor as someone repulsive. Jesus is setting the lawyer up, because, while this lawyer knows the Law very well, he knows nothing of the Gospel. So Jesus reveals the Gospel in a parable that looks, on the surface, like the Law. Jesus could have given him a straight answer. He could have said, "Since the fall into sin, no man can perfectly keep the Law, but everyone who trusts in me will be saved." But it's better to make this lawyer feel the impossibility of the Law. That's what the parable of the Good Samaritan does. And if we seek the wisdom of Jesus in it, we will also find the Gospel.

Now for the parable.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was in Judea, so the travelers on it were mostly Jewish. They were almost certainly not Samaritans. In fact, Jews would sometimes use this road in order to avoid Samaritans. Jericho was about twelve miles east of Jerusalem. But Jews from Galilee would often use it to avoid passing through Samaria. The geography of Israel is relevant here. You could divide it into three parts. The northern region of Galilee and the southern region of Judea were both Jewish, but they were separated by Samaria in the middle. Jews from Galilee would travel south to Jerusalem quite often, usually at least three times a year for the major feasts. The most direct route was through Samaria. But, if they had some extra time, they would usually go around Samaria by following the Jordan River. The southernmost part of this route was the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. So many Jews used this road in order to avoid Samaritans. And so the lawyer would have naturally pictured the man who was robbed as a Jew, a fellow kinsman of his.

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The first two travelers down the road are a priest and a Levite. These men are also Israelites, but from a different tribe. They were both from the tribe of Levi, because that was the priestly tribe. Both of these men would have worked in the service of the temple in Jerusalem. And they were almost certainly Sadducees. There were two main religious parties in Israel at the time: the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Sadducees were more of the theological liberals of the day. They didn't accept all of the Old Testament as the Word of God. They didn't believe in supernatural things like angels or the resurrection of the dead. They also didn't follow the traditions of the elders as strictly as the Pharisees did. And the party of the Sadducees consisted mostly of priests and Levites. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were the theological conservatives. They did accept the entire Old Testament. They did believe in supernatural things, especially the resurrection of the dead. And they were more zealous about keeping the law. This party consisted primarily of scribes, lawyers, and rabbis. So when the priest and the Levite pass by without helping this wounded man, the lawyer is probably thinking, *Typical Sadducees. They don't care at all about loving their neighbors. They just think their sacrifices make them clean.*

So there was some tribalism going on in those days. The Jews despised Samaritans, and the Samaritans returned the favor. But even among the Jews, there was a division between Pharisees and Sadducees. So the lawyer looked at the priest and Levite much like a Republican would look at a Democrat today, or the way a Democrat would look at a Republican. Whenever someone on the other side does something wrong, you think, *Well that's typical.* So the lawyer certainly does not identify with the priest or the Levite.

At this point, the parable seems really predictable. The next person down the road is going to be someone the lawyer can identify with, like a rabbi, a scribe, or even just a Jewish layman. 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 Jesus throws in an unexpected, and even scandalous, twist. The third person down the road is a Samaritan. This is most unexpected, because Jews used this road in order to avoid Samaritans. And this is definitely not someone the lawyer could identify with. The traditions he tried to follow told him to stay away from Samaritans.

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.

It's interesting that the Samaritan doesn't just give him emergency care, but he pledges to provide for all of his care. This would be like if you help a random stranger get to the hospital. That seems like it should be enough. But instead of considering your good deed to be done, you pay for his treatment and rehab. That would be strange. 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. That is, if he's paying attention. 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. He should still love his neighbor. That's a minor point of the parable. Jesus says at the end, **“You go, and do likewise”** (10:37). But it's not the main point, because the hero is a Samaritan, and the lawyer 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

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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).

Remember, just before Jesus launched into this story, the lawyer asked, “Who is my neighbor?” So we expect the neighbor to be the half-dead man in the ditch. And we expect the moral of the story to be, “Help that guy.” But Jesus asked the question in such a way that the neighbor is the Samaritan, which means the lawyer is the half-dead man in the ditch.

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.

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. He was even accused of being a Samaritan (John 8:48).

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 people who like us. 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). 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.