

Luke 10:25-37 (NRSV)

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 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 given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

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

In the Christian life, there come times when God seems especially kind, or more accurately, when we are more conscious of God's continuous kindness. And in those times, life imitates scripture and scripture informs life. So, this past week, as I walked with today's Gospel lesson, I found myself cast in the

middle of a real-life Good Samaritan story. I'm sure this has happened to you at some time or another. And what happens is that Scripture teaches you about life and life deepens your understanding of scripture.

Everyone knows the story of the Good Samaritan. Everyone knows it so well that it is a little hard to hear the text and a little frightening to preach it, because we think we know it so well. But, let me see what I can do to open the text up a little. First, let's place it in the narrative arc of Luke's Gospel. A couple of weeks back, we began the travel narrative section of Luke's Gospel with the story of the Samaritan town that didn't want to receive Jesus because "his face was set to Jerusalem." I'd mentioned that there had been some bad blood between the Samaritans and the Judeans and most Judeans didn't want to travel through Samaria.

Then last week, Pastor Wendy spoke about the sending of the seventy disciples. She recounted that when a town didn't receive the disciples, as the Samaritan town hadn't, that the disciples should wipe the dust of that town off their feet and move on. So we're getting a picture – the Samaritan towns had rejected Jesus, the Samaritans weren't well loved by the Judeans who were Jesus' main audience, there is a faint tension, some kind of trouble with Samaritans.

So this is in the background as a lawyer comes to test Jesus, asking, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus, of course, answers this question with a question, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" There is a Woody Allen joke. Someone asks a Woody Allen, "Why does a rabbi always answer a question with a question?" Woody Allen replies, "Why wouldn't a rabbi answer a question with a question?"

Anyway, the lawyer gives the right 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.” Now, the lawyer has done a couple of good things – he’s combined a couple of pieces of scripture from our old friend Leviticus into one answer, and he’s phrased his answer not in terms of what he should *believe*, but rather what he should *do*. Jesus approves – “do this,” he says, “and you will live.”

But then, the lawyer slips up. He follows up, but with the wrong question – he asks, “But who is my neighbor?” This is too bad – he’d done pretty well up to then. Take a second – what do you think his followup question might have been, instead? He’s been told to love God and neighbor – what might his next question be? Well, if I were given that answer, I’d hope my next question would be, “How do I do that?” But have no fear, that is the question that Jesus chooses to answer, going around the long way.

Jesus tells the story of a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho who falls into the hands of robbers, who strip and beat him and leave him half dead. A priest passes by, a Levite passes by. The story says little about motivations – perhaps they feared he was dead and if they touched him, it would leave them ritually unclean. We don’t know. But, we know that the Samaritan came near him, and when he saw him was moved with pity.

The Samaritan, of all people. The person everyone thinks of him as a black sheep, as a terrorist, as the enemy. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho is in Judea, so he is out of his neighborhood. Nonetheless, he is the one that acts with mercy, who binds the man’s wounds, who puts him on his mule, who takes him to an inn, sets him up and pays his expenses.

Now, the Good Samaritan is probably as well known as any character in the New Testament. Nonetheless, I don't think this parable is actually about him. Who is the first person mentioned as the parable is introduced? Not the Samaritan – the first person mentioned is the man who was robbed. And who is this man? A man, stripped, beaten, left for dead. How many such people do we meet in the New Testament, a man who is stripped, beaten and left for dead? Let's come back to this.

As I said, in this past week, events in our life at Saint Nicholas were mirroring the Gospel text for the week. I discovered on Monday that a young woman for whom we had been praying for some time had passed on. I called her family to offer condolences and because they had no church home, they asked if Saint Nicholas would help with the services. The family had very limited means and had barely enough to pay for the plot and the funeral home. What should we do?

Well, even if the text for the week had not been the Good Samaritan, it was obvious what we should do – we should do what was needed to help this family that had asked for help. There is probably no practice as deeply ingrained in our tradition as helping in a situation like this. So, Sandy and Jean volunteered their services, as did Melissa in preparing the bulletins and the Puzseys and the Stuart kids in folding them, we all pulled together and got the job done.

But here's the thing – as the day of the funeral progressed and as I thought about the Gospel text, I thought again, who was Jesus in the story of the Good Samaritan? And I realized that while most people would identify Jesus with the Good Samaritan, there is another level to the parable. When we behave as the Good Samaritan did, when we show mercy, that is when and that is where we see Jesus. We see Jesus in the eyes of those who need our help. And I realized what the parable was trying to say: that

we best love God by loving those whom God loves. That we best serve God when we serve those for whom Christ died. The injured vulnerable stranger by the side of the road in this parable is our Lord, is the least of these whom we are called to help and to heal.

And how do we love God and our neighbor? How do we act as a neighbor? Well, what was the first thing that the Samaritan did that the Levite and the priest didn't do? I'm indebted to Barbara Brown Taylor for this insight – what the Samaritan did that neither the priest nor the Levite did, was to draw near. The priest and the Levite went to the other side of the road. But the Samaritan came closer. Then he looked with compassion. And that is a lot easier to do when you draw near. Yes, the Samaritan did many other things – he bandaged and poured oil and wine, he put the stranger on his mule, brought him to the inn, paid the innkeeper – all of these verbs. But he began by coming near.

What do neighbors do? They come near. It's not about what they believe, exactly, or how good their theology is, or how well they know the Word and the creeds and the confessions, although all these point us in the right direction. But none of that will help if we don't draw near. All our knowledge and insight and skills won't help if we won't draw near. If we don't come close, open our eyes and our ears and see and hear our Lord in the face of someone who needs help, then whatever else we have or know or think isn't going to help very much. But when we come near, we see and we serve our Lord. When our workcampers go out to Marion, Virginia, to share work and food and lives, they draw near. When we cook a meal for Project ECHO, when we work at the Food Pantry, we draw near. And when we draw near, good things follow.

As I mentioned in the children's sermon/As I mentioned in the announcements, in the coming weeks I'm going to be resting up after some back surgery next week. What I've told everyone is to expect me back by Rally Day, although I might be back a little sooner than that. Thank you for your prayers and your good wishes.

But thank you especially for drawing near. Over the past couple years, you have become neighbors to Linda and me; we have become neighbors to you, by drawing near. In worship and confirmation and bible study, in VBS, in counseling and conversation and consolation, we draw near. So I pray that even though you won't see too much of me for a few weeks, that our nearness will remain. Have a great summer, have great adventures and experiences and we'll talk all about them when I get back in the Fall. God bless you all, especially for drawing near.

Amen.