

Sermon for July 14, 2019 – “It’s That Simple”

15th Sunday in OT, Year C – Texts: Luke 10:25-37

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There’s an old joke. A genie told a man, “I’ll give you three wishes. But I warn you Whatever I do for you, however, I must do twice as much for your worst enemy.” Now, the man thought about it and about how horrible his worst enemy had been to him and he finally decided on his three wishes. First, he wished for a billion dollars. Just like that he received a billion dollars and his enemy received two billion. Then, he wished for a lavish mansion on a rugged coast. He received his mansion, but his enemy received one twice as large. The genie said to the man “You have one final wish – what will it be?” The man replied, “I’d like to be beaten half to death.

In today’s gospel reading Jesus tells a story about a man who was beaten half to death. It’s a famous story and it’s not simply one that we’re familiar with, it’s one that’s become a part of our cultural vocabulary. In fact, on the very last episode of the TV series Seinfeld, Jerry, Louise, George and Kramer were arrested for breaking the “Good Samaritan” law. They broke it by watching an overweight man get mugged and carjacked. Kramer actually films it and they all make fun of the victim instead of helping him. Their indifference ends up landing them in prison for a year. Even if you’ve not seen this episode from Seinfeld, I think it’s safe to say that we’re all pretty familiar with the parable of the Good Samaritan. But we shouldn’t, as the saying goes, confuse familiarity with understanding. It’s pretty tempting to think that what Jesus was telling us is obvious. But is it? Very often, there are numerous layers to biblical texts, some of them quite nuanced. And you know me, I’m always looking to go a little deeper when it comes to Scripture. So, what else is going on here?

It starts with Jesus having a conversation with a lawyer. No, this is not another lawyer joke – honest! Lawyers in Jesus’ day were experts at the Law, the Law of Moses, which is to say the Levitical Law given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, all 613 of them which include the Ten Commandments. Beyond that there were, and still are, a multitude of interpretations and applications by rabbis over the ages. They’ve been collected and compiled in something called the Talmud which is several volumes long. I found an English version on Amazon that is 73 volumes! It all gets very complicated. That’s why you needed lawyers. Funny how things don’t change. In any case, the question is which of these laws is the most important? Two, as we all know; Love God. Love your neighbor. Jesus taught us this and He didn’t make that up. It was current in Jewish thought and the lawyer knows it. Now, the scholar’s answer came from two sources: **“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”** This is from Deuteronomy and it’s what’s known as the Shema and is an important daily ritual which Jews are obligated to recite first thing in the morning and right before bed. The second source comes from Leviticus itself, specifically chapter 19, verse 18, **“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”**

Now, being a good lawyer, however, he wants to nail it down further. Who is my neighbor? We need legal precision. The scholar correctly understood that the **one** secret of eternal life had **two** parts, but he misunderstood how to use them. He thought of them as boundary markers. Stay within the lines and you'll be OK. He needed to know where the lines were so that he wouldn't cross them. For Jesus, however, loving God and loving one's neighbor weren't just the most important rules, they were foundational, they were the purpose/point of all the rest. Jesus Himself said, in Matthew's Gospel, that **"On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."** Which is to say **two thirds** of the Old Testament. And so because these were so important Jesus, as He often did, told a story.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. **Down** being the operative word. Jerusalem's in the mountains. Jericho's at the same level as the Dead Sea so over the roughly 18 miles between the two cities there's about a 3,000 foot drop in elevation, which is over half a mile. That's a pretty steep drop. But that wasn't the only thing that made the journey difficult. Such a dramatic change in height brought with it a startlingly rapid shift in environmental conditions that must've been exhausting for anyone travelling between the two cities. But beyond being a physically demanding journey it was also a dangerous journey. Robbers would hide in the rocks and wait for unsuspecting travelers. It wasn't for nothing that it was known as the "way of blood" and why a certain portion of the road called the Wadi Qelt was referred to as the "valley of the shadow of death" which is, of course, we know about from Psalm 23. So, in Jesus' parable, the traveler's attacked and is left half dead. Okay, now just what is "half dead" mean? That's not easy. It's one word in Greek, hemithanes. Half dead. Almost dead. Not quite dead. In the movie, *The Princess Bride* Miracle Max says to Inigo of the dead hero Wesley "It just so happens that your friend here is mostly dead. There's a big difference between mostly dead and all dead." In Monty Python's *Quest for the Holy Grail* a cart loaded with corpses rolls through the town with the crier shouting, "Bring out your dead." One fellow brings out his half dead father who complains "I'm not dead yet."

So, there we are...a man is badly beaten lying by the side of the road hovering between life and death. A priest comes by and sees this man. Priests serve in the temple in Jerusalem making the sacrifices and running the religious institution at the heart of Jewish national life. Next, a Levite comes by. Levites are temple helpers. They assisted the priests in offering sacrifices, provided musical accompaniment, and acted – generally speaking – as Temple security. So, this Levite comes by and he too sees man. Two religious men, religious leaders, both come upon this half dead man. Both of them pass by on the other side. What's up with that?!? Maybe they were busy. Maybe they were just too important to get their hands dirty. Maybe it was an issue of ritual impurity. Maybe they thought the bandits were still nearby and that this might've been a trap. Maybe they thought this mostly dead guy would be all dead soon enough. Maybe they just didn't want to get involved. Dealing with this guy would've cost them time and money. Maybe they just couldn't be bothered. And then a Samaritan passes by. The Samaritans had some pretty messed up wrong-headed ideas about how to worship and serve God. The Jews and the Samaritans didn't exactly get along. They had common ancestors but over the centuries an intense hatred grew.

One opinion in the Talmud, which is to say some lawyer's opinion, was that Jews weren't obligated to try to save the life of a Samaritan. But this Samaritan, this persona non grata, this bitter enemy, gets his hands dirty and his clothes bloody as he bandages the victim's wounds. And he puts the victim on his donkey. He walks. The victim rides. The Samaritan takes him to an inn and spends the night watching after him. He gives the innkeeper the equivalent of two days wages, enough to keep him in the inn for quite some time and he promises to pay even more. Not only is the theologically suspect Samaritan the **hero** of the story, the properly religious priest and Levite are cast as the villains. This'd be quite shocking to Jesus' audience.

Almost (but not quite) as much as if we were to recast the parable and call it "The Good Muslim." But wait a minute, isn't the most important commandment to love God? Doesn't loving God have priority over the command to love one's neighbor? The Samaritans didn't love God properly! How in the world could a Samaritan be the hero of this story? Well, in Jesus' mind these two halves of one commandment don't conflict with each other. In fact, for Jesus, love of God and love of neighbor are connected. We cannot love God rightly if we don't love our neighbors and we cannot love our neighbors rightly if we don't love God. Sometimes, we play one off against the other. Sorry neighbor, I gotta do this thing for God. Sorry God, I gotta do this thing for my neighbor.

Jesus had a strong dislike for hypocrites, for those who failed to love their neighbors on the pretense of serving a higher good. Want proof? Okay, how about these... In Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus says, **"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gift."** And in Mark 7:10-12 Jesus says, **"For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' – that is, a gift devoted to God – then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother."** Love God. Love your neighbor. It's that simple and that complicated, mostly as has often been noted, because loving God's a lot easier than loving one's neighbor. And most of us know at least one person who proves the observation true. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to love our neighbor no matter how difficult they may be because doing so is a direct indication of our love for God. Unfortunately, in our attempt to obey these commandments we can sometimes become legalistic nitpickers. Sometimes we're just very narrow in our application of these commandments. When we're not compartmentalizing, we're trying to figure out the minimum number of things we need to do to satisfy the requirements. And I'm sorry, but that's just sad! It's not in the Bible, but I think we're all familiar with the old adage, "Charity begins at home." Maybe so, but it doesn't end there. Jesus gives us a bigger vision of love that's extravagant and uncalculating. Jesus loved us extravagantly. He got His hands dirty and His clothes bloody. He lifted us up and carried us to safety. He paid the price for our salvation.

In Jesus, the commandments to love God and neighbor fit together perfectly. Because, you see, for Jesus the debt we owe God we pay at least partially to our neighbor. We love others not merely as we love ourselves but as Jesus loved us.

Paul summarizes the Christian's response to what God's done for us in his letter to the Romans, **"Owe no one anything, except to love one another for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. "The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not covet,' ...and any other commandment are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."**

In closing I'd like to share a quote and here, brothers and sisters, is the thing "Sympathy sees and says, 'I'm sorry.', "Compassion sees and says, 'I'll help.' When we **learn** the difference, we'll **make** a difference. We know the commandments, now let's go and do likewise! It's that simple.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.