

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Pentecost 5

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, today we have that most famous of New Testament texts.

It is a text that is we know backwards and forwards.

It is a text we know up and down and sideways.

It is a text that we know in our sleep.

It is a text that has crossed over from the religious sphere, so as to be referenced in secular life.

People, even non-Christian, even non-religious individuals will speak of a helpful person as a “good Samaritan,” so familiar a phrase has that become.

And so, what more can we really say about this text that hasn’t already been said, right?

PAUSE

But with that in mind, I want us today to dig even deeper, I want us to drill down further, into this Parable of the Good Samaritan.

I want us to dig even deeper, I want us to drill down further, and by doing so, hopefully we may come to an even greater appreciation of what Jesus is doing when he tells this parable.

PAUSE

And so, let’s begin by noting that this parable is told by Jesus because a lawyer asked Jesus a question, in order to test Jesus.

Now, this lawyer, mind you, is a lawyer in terms of knowing the Jewish religious law.

This lawyer was one who would have been well-studied in the Ten Commandments and all the other decrees that had from God.

This lawyer was one who would no doubt have been able to tell us about what constitutes “work” so that we avoided doing “work” on the Sabbath.

This lawyer was one who would no doubt have been able to tell us what is considered “disrespectful” so that we avoided dishonoring our mother and father.

This lawyer was one who would no doubt have been able to tell us the definition of “fraud” and “deceit” and “dishonesty,” so that we avoided bearing false witness toward one’s neighbor.

This lawyer no doubt would have been able to tell us all these things and then some, because this lawyer would have been astute and adept, he would have been an expert in Jewish religious law.

PAUSE

But this lawyer was also familiar with the greatest commandment, which really supersedes all the other commandments from God...

This lawyer was familiar with the greatest commandment, which really sums up all the other commandments...

This lawyer even quotes the greatest commandment to Jesus, “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 you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Yes, the greatest commandment is “You shall LOVE God and you shall LOVE your neighbor.”

On this commandment, all the other commandments hang.

PAUSE

But then this lawyer, being a lawyer, knows that all law is just matter of semantics, right?

For, after all, who is my quote-unquote neighbor?

Yes, the law depends on how you define terms.

And so this lawyer asks Jesus, “But who is my neighbor?”

And behind that question we can almost see the mind of the lawyer working...

“Certainly, one doesn’t have to love everyone?”

“Certainly, one doesn’t have to love the non-Jew.”

“Certainly, one doesn’t have to love the Gentile.”

“Certainly, one doesn’t have to love the Romans, who are now at this very moment occupying God’s Holy Land.”

“Certainly, one doesn’t have to love Caesar.”

“Certainly, one doesn’t have to love everyone?”

And this question, “Who is my neighbor” ... this, too, is part of the lawyer’s test, because there would be definite fallout depending on how Jesus answered that question.

Those around Jesus would be upset to hear that they are to love the Gentile and the Roman soldier, in the same way they are to love their Jewish brothers and sisters.

Jesus could do himself a grave disservice depending on how he answered this question.

And so, Jesus, being a smart rabbi, and as rabbis are prone to answer a question with a question...Jesus puts the question back on the lawyer, within the context of telling the lawyer a parable.

And that question, “Who is neighbor? Who do I have to love?” takes on greatest significance when we realize that Jesus tells a parable about a Samaritan, who in the eyes of this lawyer, and in the eyes of most any faithful Jew, would have been seen as a social pariah, as someone unholy, as someone who was beyond God’s grace.

Jews and Samaritans did not get along, because Samaritans were seen as unclean. Samaritans had different laws regarding cleanliness than Jews. And the main holy site differed between Jews and Samaritans. Jews worshipped at Jerusalem; Samaritans at Mt. Gerizim.

Samaritans were also not of pure Jewish blood, because when their land was conquered by the Assyrians, they had intermarried with foreigners.

So for all these reasons Jews and Samaritans didn't get along, and indeed, they avoided contact with each other.

PAUSE

Indeed, the reality of a "Samaritan" is so abhorrent to the lawyer in our story, that the lawyer can't even find it within himself to say to the word "Samaritan."

After Jesus tells the parable and then asks the lawyer who was the neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers, the lawyer says, "The ONE who showed him mercy."

The lawyer can't even bring himself to say "Samaritan."

It is like something out of Harry Potter: "He who must not be named."

The Samaritan is so abhorrent in the mind of the lawyer, and yet Jesus' parable is about a Samaritan who is the hero.

The Samaritan is the one who is the neighbor.

Now, with all this said, we can now highlight that most important insight we see from digging deeper, from drilling down further into this story.

And that insight is this...Jesus wants to open the eyes of the lawyer, and he wants to open our eyes, too.

In fact, the story here about the lawyer and the subsequent telling of the parable...this story here today comes right on the heels of when Jesus' disciples had returned from having been sent out by Jesus, a story we heard last week in our gospel.

The seventy had been sent out and they had gone about the mission of the gospel, they had proclaimed the good news, and then they returned, saying, "Lord, in your name, even the demons submit to us."

And Jesus then says to his disciples, "Blessed are the EYES that SEE what you SEE! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to SEE what you SEE, but they did not SEE it."

And the more and more I study and read scripture...

The more and more I try to figure out what Jesus' ministry in this world was all about...

The more I am convinced that Jesus was all about trying to open everyone's eyes to see more clearly.

Again the words of C.S. Lewis ring so true here.

Lewis said, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun (S-U-N) has risen; not only because I see it (the sun), but because by the sun I see everything else."

"I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen; not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."

Jesus Christ and Christianity, in general, helps us to see everything more clearly.

And this then is what Jesus was doing in his earthly ministry.

To be sure, this is what we observe going on in this story between Jesus and the lawyer.

Jesus shares the Parable of the Good Samaritan with the lawyer to help him see.

He is working to help the lawyer see rightly, to see clearly.

PAUSE

Now, first off, what is the law about? But about love.

The law, the Ten Commandments, given by God to Moses, who in turn gave it to the people of God...the law was given by God NOT to be burden, not to be something that would weigh upon the people.

The law was meant to be a gift, by which to help God's people live in community with one another.

It is the same with our laws today. The laws in our society are not meant to be a burden.

The law was given in ancient times as a means to guide people into loving relationships with one another.

But the law became a taskmaster because of the power of sin was already at work in people.

Yes, the age-old problem of sin stemming back to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden tarnishes everything good that is given by God, such that the law then becomes a taskmaster.

And that is why then, we need Christ to help us see rightly, to help us see clearly.

Indeed, the people of God came to see again that the law is about love, that is, how to love God and to love our neighbor.

The lawyer in our story gets this much. He understands, he sees the purpose of the law.

BUT, even so, sin still gets in the way, gets in our minds, poisoning God's gift.

Sin gets in there even when we understand God's gift of love set forth in the law.

Sin still gets in there, and so the lawyer, trying to justify himself, asks Jesus, "But who is my neighbor? Do I really have to love everyone?"

And so Jesus tells this parable about the Good Samaritan to help the lawyer, and us, see rightly, to see clearly.

Again, Jesus says just before our reading today, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see, but did not see."

Jesus is saying that we are more blessed than the kings and rulers of the world, we are more blessed than holy people, gurus and shay-muhns and prophets...we are more blessed than all of these if our eyes are open to the light of God in his Son Jesus Christ.

PAUSE

And so, having his eyes opened by the gospel of Jesus Christ, Jesus tells the lawyer to go and to do as the Samaritan has done, go and be merciful to any and every person, regardless of their ethnicity, their religious beliefs, their skin color, their vocation...

Go and be merciful to the non-Jew, to the Gentile, to the Samaritan, and to the Roman occupier...

Go and be merciful to any and every person whom you come across who is in need.

Go and be merciful, for salvation is based not so much on right belief...

As we see here in this story, salvation is not so much a creed, even though we profess a creed each Sunday...

Salvation is not so much what we believe as it is how we live out that belief. Go and be merciful.

And yes, that living out of our faith may at times be quite hard...

The rich man who Jesus sent away, saying "Give away all your possessions and then come and follow me..." no doubt found it hard to live out his faith.

He went away grieving, we are told, for he had many possessions.

And the lawyer here probably, although it doesn't say, but this lawyer probably went away grieving, too, because his reality had been changed, too.

His understanding of God's law was upended.

But the gospel of Jesus Christ works like this, doesn't it?

The gospel upends things, and tests us.

In fact, I remember long ago in seminary, we, as young theological students, learned that the gospel not only comforts the afflicted, which we certainly hope it would...

Yes, the gospel of God comforts the afflicted, BUT the gospel of God also afflicts the comforted...

In other words, sometimes the gospel of God will test and challenge us to our core, it will rub us the wrong way, it will make us uncomfortable and make us question our reality.

Indeed, if we are not coming away from worship or from our daily devotions after having engaged the Gospel of God...

If we are not coming away even the least bit uneasy, after experiencing the Gospel of God, then we probably have missed something.

The Gospel is not easy, as the lawyer discovered, as we hopefully discover.

But that is good. That is after all God's gift of helping us to see and to grow.

For, yes, the Gospel challenges and tests us, but in truth all the Gospel really wants, is for us to see more clearly, it wants us to understand more rightly, so that we can go and be merciful to all in need.

Thanks be to God. Amen.