

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (c)
Deuteronomy 30:9-14 Colossians 1:1-14 Luke 10:25-37
Saint John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
July 10, 2022 [Traditional]

A lawyer asks Jesus what he needs to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him, "you know the law. Love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." If you're wanting to gain eternal life in terms of doing the law and fulfilling requirements, it's pretty straightforward. Just do that: love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself. Heaven will be yours.

I had a professor in seminary who was very clear about the requirements to pass his class. At the beginning of the semester he even handed out a bullet list detailing under what circumstances he would grant an extension on an assignment. Obviously he'd been having troubles with students turning in things late and finding excuses. So he made it clear: only if you are sick, only if a relative has died, etc. There were only three or four very specific situations where you could get extra time to hand in your paper. It was all spelled out clearly. At the end of the semester, he reminded us of those requirements, and sure enough a bunch of hands went up: "What if I'm under a lot of stress? What if I'm really tired? What if a meteorite hits my computer?"

The lawyer in the gospel is doing that. He hears the requirement, particularly "love your neighbor as yourself," and immediately he wants to find exceptions to that rule. He says to Jesus: "Well, explain to me who my neighbor is." That's what we do when we know we haven't measured up (and that we probably won't measure up) to an external requirement. We find ways to make the requirement more fuzzy, questionable, and complicated. It's like, Jesus repeats the old commandment...and it's really a minimum, low bar. But in our knowledge that we're broken, we turn even the lowest bar—we turn the simple commandment into a complicated maze of rules and exceptions to the rules that we can hide ourselves in, so no one sees the fact that we're never going to get ourselves over that bar.

And isn't that what Jesus is constantly getting at when he's arguing with the religious authorities of his day. The law is meant to be like a simple arrow pointing us toward God, who has already saved us sinners, so we can live a life of freedom and worship and praise towards him. But in our fear and lack of faith in God who has saved us, we make the simple arrow of the law into a forest of requirements in which we can hide. Requirements by which we justify ourselves, excuse ourselves, and even try to save ourselves.

And notice how the lawyer is stuck particularly on the second part of the requirement: Love your neighbor as yourself. Now in his mind, it's easy to love God, isn't it. The first part of the requirement (loving God)...he probably thinks he's got that in the bag. It's the second part that makes him squirm: love your neighbor as yourself. The problem is, though, Jesus always links those two inextricably, love of God and love of neighbor. We cannot separate them. With Jesus, we can't squirm our way out of it: As 1st John

puts it: “Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar.” It’s literally like: Jesus brings the divine love of God down to earth. He says our love for God is not real unless it is embodied—incarnate—in this world, in our love for each other. Jesus doesn’t just give us a verbal message, “I love you, I hope you make it home to me.” No, Jesus is all about DOING God’s love: walking with us on the road every step of the way, suffering with us, dying with us, defeating death for us. Then he says, “love your neighbor as I have loved you.”

I love how, to answer the lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus launches immediately into a parable...a story of sacrificial love. Love that’s not just words, but actions. The Samaritan in the parable loves without hesitation, without calculation, without reservation. He’s not thinking, “I’m living up to a big requirement here.” He helps the victim on the road, because that’s who he is. And he’s willing to pay for everything until the victim of the crime gets better. So here’s a guy who is not worried about his own “stuff.” He’s confident enough—he has faith enough—about his future, about his life, about who he is, that he can stop when he comes across someone in need. He can shift gear for another person. He’s free enough to give. Commandments cannot make a person like that. Only love can make a person like that. Love fulfills all the commandments and goes beyond them, because it’s beyond self-justification. Love is not thinking about commandments.

From Jesus’ parable, we see that the question is not really "who is my neighbor?" It's *what kind of neighbor am I to the people around me?* And with Jesus, I’ve got no more excuses. I can’t blame my circumstances. If there’s a problem, it’s me, and my lack of love. It’s my excuse that I don’t have enough time. If I listen to Jesus, I can’t defend myself any longer. I can’t try to hide myself in a maze of exceptions. Praise God, I can live by the Spirit instead of by the law. Because the law does nothing but show me my failures and inability to be the person God wants me to be.

You know, as believers we’re fully aware that we’re broken and that we can’t get ourselves even over the minimum bar. We cannot do it. But as people who know what Jesus has done for us, we scoff at the minimum requirements expected of us. We see them for what they are—way too small, way too easy. We want to do more. We are in love with God, and that love is directly expressed towards the hurting person in front of us, as if that person is Jesus himself. With Jesus, you know you have all the time you need. You don’t have to hesitate and guiltily walk by your neighbor on the road to save your own life. God has bought your future for you completely. He has given you your destination. You cannot decide who to give your love to anymore. Instead, love HAS you.

It’s awesome to think: God could have walked around us, like the religious leaders walked around the broken man in the road in gospel lesson. God had all freedom to go straight to his goal. He could have said this broken world is over with, and made a new world out of nothing. Instead, out of love, he stopped on the road, like the Samaritan did, to raise you and me up from death with Jesus, and bring us into that new world, to be with him forever. In a way, you can actually think of Jesus as a surprising detour that

God took, to make you and me—sinners—part of his future. But it turns out...and God wants us to know...the detour is really the main event. The detour is what God has been about the whole time. The detour he took to pick you and me up off the road shows us who He is more clearly than anything else! And when you're in love with this God, who takes detours to meet people on side-roads, you want to be like him for other people. You take detours for them.

With the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus lays us bare. No more excuses to make regarding our responsibility to the people around us. No more self-justification is possible. He shows us something better. A new way to live: the way of the Spirit. Your sin, your fears, your future—it's all taken care of on a cross, he says. So now it's time to let all that go and trust him. Forget the small requirements and go all the way for people like God does. Live in the Holy Spirit towards your neighbors. Be the presence of Christ to them. This is not too hard for us. In fact, it's the secret to a life of joy.

I like to think of Jesus as God getting down on his knees in the middle of the road, spilling his heart out to us broken sinners. He breaks himself open, and he proposes to us. Here's the life—here's the future—that I want to give you completely for free. He's paid the entire cost of our future. He's willing to get beaten and broken, to make that proposal to us on the road.

People can and do walk around him and ignore him. Maybe they've got other plans; they see more important goals out there in the distance. But not us. Right here, through these simple things we do together as God's people—hearing God's Word, eating a meal together, sharing in this fellowship, supporting each other with God's love—these simple things that have become essential to us—this is where our future keeps coming to us, complete and renewed every week. It's a gift from God who stopped on the road—stopped everything, to lift us up. And how do we respond? Well, now we're free to do like he does. We let go of the old life of requirements, as the Holy Spirit takes hold of us. And we start taking those detours. We're no longer trying to get ourselves to the right neighborhood. Instead we become the neighbors God created us to be, to each and every person on the road.