

Today's Gospel passage is one that may be new to some of us and quite familiar to others. When we hear or read the Bible, we need to try and hear or read it as if for the first time, without assuming we already know what it's about. We want to be open to new light breaking forth from God's Word. Let's open ourselves to what God may wish to say to us.

Listen to **Luke 10:25-37**, "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.**'"

Let's start at the beginning. "Just then a lawyer stood up **to test Jesus**." Whenever people test Jesus, they're the ones who end up being tested; it's their hearts and motives that are revealed. The lawyer is an expert in the Law of Moses and he's testing Jesus. It stinks when people do this. There's a difference between a person who is truly seeking truth, understanding and wisdom, and wants to learn and grow, and a person who is smug, arrogant, not open to learning or changing his or her mind, or who merely wants to test you to see if you agree with their opinion, which they're 100 % convinced is the correct one. The lawyer asks Jesus what he must "**do to inherit eternal life.**" Jesus responds to the lawyer's question with a question of his own. "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" This is a way of saying, "Aren't you an expert in the scriptures? What do they say?" The lawyer successfully mentions the need to love both God and our neighbor that are found in *Deuteronomy 6:5* and *Leviticus 19:18*. The lawyer already knew the answers to his own questions. Jesus said to him, "**You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.**"

What's important to note here is that it's not enough to know the right answer. It's not enough to be able to quote the Bible or to say what's important or to say you believe something.

Asking questions with no intention of implementing or carrying out the answers is not the right way to live. Anyone who claims to be a Christian, but whose life is totally lacking in Christlike behavior or the fruit of the Spirit, is not likely truly a follower of Christ no matter how vociferously they claim to be. Jesus says to the man, **“do this, and you will live.” Do you love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind? Do love your neighbor.** “But wanting to justify himself, the man asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” “Justify himself” means to show himself to be righteous and acceptable to God. Why doesn't the lawyer, say, “Thanks for letting me know I'm on the right track, Jesus, I'll strive with my whole being to love God and everyone I meet, starting with my neighbors who live right beside me who I see all the time.” He doesn't say this because he was looking to limit who he needed to care about rather than to love and care for other people, even those right outside his own door.

How would you answer the question, who is my neighbor? Is it someone who lives close to you? Is it someone who shares a similar faith or cultural background? Is it any individual who shares your world view? Who is your neighbor? What if Jesus means our actual neighbors who live beside us, across the street, and behind our backyard? Jesus answers the lawyer's neighbor question with a story. The first character we meet in Jesus' story is “a man” who “was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.” This is about a 17-mile journey with a significant drop in elevation of close to 3,000 feet. The road between the cities was notoriously dangerous. The man could be anyone. He's an innocent victim of random violence. Next come the robbers “who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.” The robbers' approach to life is **“what's yours is mine and I'm going to take it.”** One thing I'll say for the robbers is at least they have the courage to confront someone face to face. There are many ways people rob and steal with the robber's attitude of “what's yours is mine and I'm going to take it.” People can steal money, they can rob a reputation, or they can rob from future generations. Behind “what's yours is mine and I'm going to take it,” is callousness toward others, selfishness that acts only for one's immediate interest, and a willingness to engage in brutality and violence to get what one wants.

“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.” “The priest” represented the highest religious leadership among the Jews; the Levite was the designated lay associate of the priest. The priest and the Levite are Jewish religious leaders who have a good knowledge of God's laws. They certainly know about loving God and loving their neighbor, but they do nothing for the man lying on the side of the road. Perhaps they were conflicted about what to do. The body on the road could have been planted by robbers to stop and distract a traveler. Perhaps they were scared of being victimized themselves. If the man was dead, then contact with a corpse would have prevented them from being able to carry out their religious duties for a time. If I had been late for church today because I saw someone on the side of Route 137 and ended up taking him to a medical

center and missed worship some of you might have been okay with that, others would have questioned why I was late or a no-show. Sometimes it's hard to choose between two things that both seem important.

We want to be careful not to be too quick to condemn the priest and the Levite, none of us knows how we will respond in stressful situations until we're in them. We all like to imagine we'd be courageous and brave, but unless you've been in a notoriously dangerous place and seen someone on the ground, unresponsive, or been in another situation, you truly don't know what you'd do. It would've been nice if the priest and Levite had helped the man, but they chose safety, security and fear over risk, mercy and courage. They passed by and went on their way. The approach to life of the priest and Levite in the story is **“What's mine is mine and I'm going to keep it.”** This is the approach or attitude of many people. I take care of myself. What happens to other people isn't my business or concern. Everybody should look out for themselves.

The final person in the story is a Samaritan, a person from the province of Samaria. This is a surprise. We'd expect that after the priest and the Levite, that the third person would be an Israelite, but it's not. The relationship between the Jews and Samaritans was similar to any relationship marked by strong racial or cultural prejudice. The Jews considered Samaritans to be social outcasts, untouchables, racially inferior, and practicing a false religion. They avoided any association with Samaritans, traveling long distances out of their way to avoid passing through a Samaritan area. Any close physical contact; drinking water from a common bucket, eating a meal with a Samaritan, would make a Jewish person ceremonially unclean—unable to participate in temple worship for a period of time. The Samaritans responded quite naturally with strong dislike or hatred for Jews. Understanding this cultural prejudice makes the end of Jesus' story all the more surprising. It was a Samaritan, a foreigner not expected to show sympathy to Jews, who is moved with pity and shows mercy.

Because the phrase “Good Samaritan” has become an almost universally known way to describe someone who helps a stranger in need, we have lost the shock value of Jesus' story. You must imagine the hero of the story being the last person you would ever see as a hero; imagine the individual or type of person you most dislike, disdain or fear the most being the person Jesus says is moved with pity. Can you do that? Imagine someone whose world view is the opposite of yours being the hero of Jesus' story. Can you? The man who delayed his own journey, risked danger to himself, expended great energy, spent two days wages with the assurance of more, and promised to follow up on his commitment was ceremonially unclean, socially an outcast, and religiously a heretic. When we can begin to grasp how that feels, then we can start to understand how it felt to the lawyer and those who heard Jesus tell this story.

In the story, so there's no mistake, Jesus says the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan all “saw” the man. There's no giving the priest and the Levite a pass because they didn't see the man or weren't aware of him. They saw him and chose to pass by **on the other side**. They didn't even go near him. They chose not to get involved. When the Samaritan saw him, **“he**

was moved with pity.” And **“He went to him.”** The difference among all the characters in the story is that **only one was moved with pity.** Only one acts out of a deep sense of compassion and mercy. The Samaritan’s approach to life is, **“What’s mine is yours, and I’m going to share it.”** This is the attitude Jesus is hoping to cultivate in all of us. The Samaritan demonstrates mercy, compassion, courage, a willingness to risk, and generous love. He puts oil on the man’s wounds to soften them and wine to cleanse them. He bandages the man up. “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.’” The Samaritan acts out of mercy and love without partiality or preference and expects nothing in return.

Then Jesus turns back to the lawyer and asks him a question in response to his question, **“And who is my neighbor?”** Jesus changes the focus of the lawyer’s question from, “And who is my neighbor?” to **“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”** This compels the lawyer to give a reply very different than he’d like—making him commend someone of a deeply hated race. And he does it, sort of. He can’t bring himself to say, “The Samaritan.” All he can manage is, **“The one who showed him mercy.”** Jesus said to him, **“Go and do likewise.”**

Having the right answers and being able to quote the Bible like the lawyer in the parable doesn’t mean one knows or obeys God. Demons can do that and still do. Jesus is trying to get the man to change his approach to life as well as all of us who hear this story. “What’s yours is mine and I’m going to take it. What’s mine is mine and I’m going to keep it. What’s mine is yours and I’m going to share it.” Which of these would Jesus say most accurately describes how you approach and live your life? **Having compassion, practicing mercy, caring for others, and sharing their problems, lays the foundation for a meaningful life, not only as an individual, a family, but for a neighborhood, a community, and for humanity as a whole.**

The power of this story consists in Jesus’ choice of the character to illustrate love of neighbor and the love of God; a Samaritan. The social boundaries of that time were clear and inflexible; a Samaritan would not be considered a model of neighborliness. Jesus says you’re to **“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.”** Then and now that means we must often reject society’s rules in favor of the teaching of the kingdom of God in which there are no distinctions and boundaries between its members. **The rules in God’s society are two: to love God and one’s neighbor,** but those rules are so different from those of the world in which we live that living by them will call us to disregard all else to follow Jesus’ example.

I close with this thought: If you’re the man in the parable who is stripped, beaten, and left for dead; how much do you care about the religion, nationality or class of the person who shows you mercy?

The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes;
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown:
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptered sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings.
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.
—William Shakespeare, Portia in the *Merchant of Venice*

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What do Jesus and the lawyer agree on (verses 25-28)?
2. Why is “who is my neighbor” an important question?
3. Jesus making the Samaritan the “hero” and the one to emulate would have shocked his Jewish audience. If Jesus was telling this story today to American Christians who or what type of person do you think he’d use instead of a Samaritan?
4. What does Jesus want to happen to and through us as a result of experiencing this story?
5. How does this story answer the lawyer’s original question, “Who is my neighbor?”
6. How will you apply this story in your own life? How will you love your actual, physical neighbors? What first steps can you take this week?