

Proper 10C 2019 Sermon
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."

A lawyer, a man trained in the Torah, the Jewish religious law, stands up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he says, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" But rather than responding to the question, Jesus asks a question in return: "What is written in the law?" The lawyer answers, "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 Jesus replies, "You have given the right answer; [now] **do** this, and you will live."

Why does the lawyer ask a question to which he already *knows* the right answer? Because his purpose in asking the question is not to obtain a sincere answer from Jesus, not to truly learn how to live life in God; rather, he is seeking to trip Jesus up.

And, my friends, do we not see it happen every day, especially in the political arena? People not *really* wanting answers to our world's problems, not wanting to solve our problems together, but rather wanting to trip up someone of the "other" political persuasion? Catch them saying something obviously wrong or stupid or seemingly unkind, and we feel like we've "won," we've accomplished what we set out to do, which is simply to discredit the other person. If you listen to a commentator or news outlet which leans heavily toward either the Democratic or Republican side, you'd think that *nobody* of the opposite party had ever had a wise thought or did anything good. So often, especially as election

season gears up, we aren't really looking for **answers** to our world's problems; we want to trip someone up and make them look bad, just like the lawyer in today's Gospel wants to trip Jesus up and make him look bad.

But Jesus isn't playing the game. He takes the lawyer's question seriously, and uses it as an opportunity to lead the man, and any others who might be listening, closer to God and into the flow of God's life and love, into God's kingdom, which is not simply something to be inherited in the future, but rather something to be lived *in* and lived *out*, here and now.

The lawyer's initial question having failed to trip Jesus up, he tries again. "And who is my neighbor?" he asks. Fr. John Shea comments: "[This second] question... is meant to lead Jesus into a maze of opinions. [The lawyer] wants some legal wrangling about boundaries and obligations."¹ But again, Jesus refuses to play that game. Whereas the lawyer speaks about inheriting eternal life after death, Jesus is concerned that people live and act in the kingdom of God's love and compassion *now*. And so, Jesus tells a story about a man who is traveling along a road and is attacked by robbers who take his money and his clothes and beat him until he is "half dead."

A priest and a Levite, who both hold respected offices in the Jewish Temple, travel down that same road, one after the other, see the man, and each of them, in turn, passes by on the other side. Again, John Shea remarks: "Both the Levite and priest, knowledgeable in the law, can *recite* the double commandment [about loving God and neighbor]. But, like the lawyer himself, neither of them can *do* it. In hearing [Jesus'] story, the lawyer does not identify with the robbed and beaten man or with the Samaritan; he is most like the Levite and priest who continue to go their way"² – steeped in the letter of the Law, but not living it out in their own lives.

Allow me to finish this sermon by quoting at some length Episcopal priest, professor, and best-selling author Barbara Brown Taylor, who points out the fact that just because we might know the right answers, speak the right words, and believe the right things doesn't mean we actually live them out in our lives. She writes:

"[G]etting the words right is not the same thing as giving them flesh. Answers weigh about as much as the breath it takes to expel them. Like helium balloons, they come out of the mouth and float away, leaving no footprints anywhere on the ground.

"A right answer has never picked up a frightened child, or put an ice chip in the mouth of a dying friend. A right answer has never written a check to the Red Cross, or pried up stinking linoleum from a kitchen floor in the ninth ward of New Orleans [after Hurricane Katrina]... It kind of makes you wonder why religious

people spend so much time vetting each other on right answers, when the truth is that a right answer alone never changed a thing.

“‘You have given the right answer,’ Jesus says to the lawyer; [now] ‘*do* this, and you will live.’

“...**Do** love. Don’t just think love, say love, have faith in love, or believe that God is love. Give up the idea that your ideas alone can save you. If you know the right words, then bring those words to life by giving them your own flesh. Put them into practice. Do love, and you will live...

“[N]ote that everyone in [Jesus’] story...— everyone, that is, but the half dead man—belongs to an identifiable subculture. The priest, the Levite and the Samaritan are all referred to by the names of their respective groups, which are set apart from one another by profession, by tribe, by class, and by ideology. The Levite is lower than the priest in the Jerusalem temple hierarchy. The Samaritan is at odds with both of them, thanks to an historic hostility between Jews and Samaritans that runs both ways...

“[But we know nothing about the man who was beaten, robbed, and left half dead. We don’t know whether he was rich or poor, since both his money and his clothing were stolen.] He can’t talk, so we don’t know what language he speaks. He isn’t identified with a group, so we don’t know what his loyalties are. All we know is that he has been robbed, stripped, beaten and left for dead...

“[Consider the verbs that are used in the telling of this amazing parable. For both the Levite and the priest, there are only two verbs: They looked, and they passed by.] Whatever else they think, say, have faith in or believe, this is what they actually do. Turn the sound down and you can see how much good right answers **do**.

“[The Samaritan] comes near the man, sees him, is moved by him, goes to him, and bandages his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. He puts the man on his animal, brings him to an inn, takes care of him, takes money out of his pocket and gives it to the innkeeper, and asks the innkeeper to take care of the half dead man, saying that he will come back and repay whatever more the innkeeper spends. That’s a whopping fourteen verbs for the Samaritan, in whom God’s word becomes flesh...

“[A]ny right answer about divine reality that does not translate into bodily care for the neighbor is of limited use or interest to God. Plus, there is only one verb in this story that leads to all the rest, the one thing the Samaritan does that sets him apart from his two predecessors so that everything else can happen.

“He comes near the man.

“If there are moral or physical dangers involved, the Samaritan ignores them. If there are ancient hostilities between their people, the Samaritan disregards them. If there are great gaps between their understandings of God that might cause them to begin arguing with one another the moment the half dead man comes to, the Samaritan figures he’ll deal with that later. He comes near the man, which is what puts him in the half dead man’s neighborhood. He comes near enough to see him, near enough to be moved with pity for him, near enough to show him mercy.

“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

“You know the right answer, because you have heard the story more times than you can count. But if you too wish to know what you must do to inherit eternal life, [or, to use Jesus’ more relevant words, to live in God’s kingdom now,] the answer becomes flesh right here: Come near. It’s what God does [for us] in Christ. It’s where the kingdom is—so near. Coming near is God’s specialty act, from which all other verbs flow.

“Come near... -- near enough to see, near enough to feel, near enough to recognize a neighbor in someone who needs a neighbor bad. **Do** this and you will live, Jesus says. Throw your body into it and you may even find that your question about eternal life [after death] is not such a burning question for you anymore—because the minute God’s word becomes flesh in you, heaven is where you are.”³

AMEN

1 John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press,

2006, p. 195

2 *Ibid.*, p. 196

3 Barbara Brown Taylor:

<http://www.carbondalecommunityumchurch.com/documents/July102016DoThisandYouWillLivebyBarbaraBrownTaylor.pdf>