

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10C)

July 11, 2010



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Lessons

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

Psalm 25:1-10 (4)

Colossians 1:1-14

St. Luke 10:25-37

Semicontinuous Series:

Amos 7:7-17

Psalm 82 (8)

Prayer of the Day

O Lord God, your mercy delights us, and the world longs for your loving care. Hear the cries of everyone in need, and turn our hearts to love our neighbors with the love of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.



**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**

God's work. Our hands.

Who is my neighbor?
An unjustified question.
Grace births compassion.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace, from God our father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

"Who is my neighbor?"

This is the question that kicks off the parable Jesus tells in today's Gospel lesson. It is probably the most familiar of all his parables. All the kids at camp know it. Even non-Christians in our culture would be at least somewhat familiar with it, if only familiar with the use of "Good Samaritan" as a description of someone who does something compassionate. The parable has developed a life of its own, apart from the Bible, but that sometimes obscures the true meaning of this story. We are often tempted to quickly understand it as Jesus' encouragement to be helpful to our neighbors. But there is far more to the story than that.

This parable takes place within the larger context of a conversation between Jesus and a lawyer. A friend of mine, [Pastor John Petty](#), says:

“Then, as now, the presence of a lawyer indicates that complications are about to arise.

Lawyers worry about exactitude and the definition of terms. Luke tells us that the lawyer is ‘testing’ Jesus with his question about how to attain eternal life.”¹

The conversation begins with the lawyer’s first question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” It is a question that seems to have a straightforward answer; one that Jesus could provide with a few words. But Jesus isn’t always interested in providing straightforward answers. He wants the lawyer to struggle with his own question for a bit.

So Jesus asks him: “How would you answer that question? What do the Scriptures say?” His answer seems like a good one. It has strong support in the Old Testament.² It is an answer that Jesus himself gives on at least one other occasion.³ It shows a healthy concern for community. It makes sense. 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.” Jesus replies: “Very good. You are quite right. Do this, and you’ll be in great shape.”

It is then that the lawyer shows his true stripes. In verse 29 we read: “But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ ” Listen to that again: “wanting to justify himself.” The lawyer is asking the right question, and he even has a good answer for himself. But his follow-up question shows us that he is asking it for the wrong reason. He doesn’t want to understand how God is being revealed in Jesus. Instead, he wants to know what the bottom line is. How many people actually qualify as his neighbor? What is the minimum amount of good he has to do before he can be sure of his membership in God’s eternity? What level of performance does he have to achieve before he can be sure that he has earned God’s reward?

So when the answer to “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” is “Love God with your whole being, and love your neighbor as yourself” the lawyer begins to cover his bases, instead of allowing these words to touch his heart. Just how far is enough? Who is my neighbor? I don’t have to love everyone, do I? Love is great, but let’s have some limits... You don’t know my neighbors!”

“Who is my neighbor?” the lawyer asks. This isn’t the innocent question of one who is trying to follow Jesus. It is the misguided attempt to set some limits as to how far he has to go. It is his attempt to determine just how much of his life he needs to turn over to God before he is O.K. His question really is not: “Who is my neighbor?” Instead, it is: “Who can I get away with not loving, and still be in good standing with God?”

The truth is: that is a natural reaction. We are brought up that way. We have to pass so many tests to complete a class. We have to complete so many classes to achieve a degree. We have to put in so many hours to maintain a job. It is no wonder that many of us think in terms of what is the minimum amount of obedience that God requires. That is the way our society is set up. We are given minimum and maximum standards of performance in almost everything we do. The lawyer’s question is not unusual; it simply asks what minimums and maximums apply in the life of the faithful. Is there a limit to forgiveness? Are there boundaries beyond which we need not go? What does God expect of me, and what can I get away with, without being punished?

That may be a natural reaction, but that’s not God’s way of doing business. the life of faith isn’t a simple set of rules to be followed, as if a manual could be created that might cover every situation. The life of faith is a journey, and as we travel along that journey, every step of the way we determine by our words and actions whether or not God is welcome to journey with us.

¹ John Petty, Progressive Involvement. www.ProgressiveInvolvement.com; Lectionary Blogging: Luke 10:25-37.

² See Deuteronomy 6:5; Deuteronomy 13:3; Deuteronomy 30:6; Leviticus 19:18.

³ See Matthew 22:37; St. Mark 12:30.

That came home to me in a painful way not so long ago. It was a busy weekend for the Risendal family. We found ourselves running between baseball games, church activities, and personal commitments. As I flew down the highway at 70 m.p.h., I saw a car parked on the side of the road. A quick glance revealed that it was a family car, obviously sidelined with a flat tire. Honestly, they looked like they could use some help, but as I passed by, I was thinking of the people who were waiting for me to arrive. I drove on by, assuming that others (with more time than I had) would stop to help this family. But as they faded out of view in my rear-view mirror, it occurred to me that there isn't a world of difference between me and the religious officials described in Jesus' parable. I wondered how many times our busy schedules, and our commitment to care for our own family and friends, prevent us from reaching out in love to others who are in a time of need. I realized how important it is that we hear — that I hear! — the words of this morning's lesson, and allow them to sink into our hearts.

At the heart of this morning's parable is the message that when Christ has taken hold of our hearts, and we have experienced the depth of God's grace, then we begin to live with a natural and generous love. When we know God's grace, when we are committed to God's grace, we find ourselves living in ways that are gracious to others. Then the question becomes not "Who is my neighbor?" but "How can I thank God by being a neighbor to someone else?"

With this parable, Jesus stretches our understanding of what neighborliness is all about. It isn't about drawing a tight circle, and loving those who are closest to us. It is about God's expansive love, and its capacity to expand our own love and compassion. Undocumented aliens in Arizona: how might I become a neighbor to them? The bureaucrats down at Greenwood Village who have ground our construction project to a halt on numerous occasions: how can I become a neighbor to them? People whose political sensibilities lie at the far extreme of the spectrum from mine: how can I become a neighbor to them? Acquaintances and co-workers and family members who rub me the wrong way; how can I become a neighbor to them?

We have so many opportunities to respond to God's grace; so many opportunities to make a witness as to what stands at the center of our lives. From the support we give to this congregation, to the ways that we reach into our own community, to the interest we take in an [African hospital](#): our actions, visible and tangible, are hints as to what is taking place in our own hearts.

I pray that here at Saint Peter, we will be so deeply touched by God's grace, that with love, compassion, generosity and a willing spirit we, like that Samaritan in Jesus' parable, will see all of life as a chance to be neighbor to others. That is the Christ-life. That is the grace that God has given to us. May we be faithful in sharing it with others.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor

Gospel Lesson; English Text ⁴

^{10:25} Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷ 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." ²⁸ And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰ 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. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling

⁴ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Worship/Lectinary.aspx>.

came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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.' ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise.

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Gospel Lesson; Greek Text

^{10:25} Καὶ ἰδοὺ νομικός τις ἀνέστη ἐκπειράζων αὐτὸν λέγων· διδάσκαλε, τί ποιήσας ζωὴν αἰώνιον κληρονομήσω; ²⁶ ὁ δὲ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτὸν· ἐν τῷ νόμῳ τί γέγραπται; πῶς ἀναγινώσκεις; ²⁷ ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν· ἀγαπήσεις κύριον τὸν θεὸν σου ἐξ ὅλης [τῆς] καρδίας σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ ψυχῇ σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ ἰσχύϊ σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ διανοίᾳ σου, καὶ τὸν πλησίον σου ὡς σεαυτὸν. ²⁸ εἶπεν δὲ αὐτῷ· ὀρθῶς ἀπεκρίθης· τοῦτο ποιεῖ καὶ ζῆση.

²⁹ ὁ δὲ θέλων δικαιοῦσαι ἑαυτὸν εἶπεν πρὸς τὸν Ἰησοῦν· καὶ τίς ἐστὶν μου πλησίον; ³⁰ Ὑπολαβὼν ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν· ἄνθρωπος τις κατέβαινε ἀπὸ Ἱερουσαλὴμ εἰς Ἱεριχὼ καὶ λησταῖς περιέπεσε, οἱ καὶ ἐκδύσαντες αὐτὸν καὶ πληγὰς ἐπιθέντες ἀπήλθον ἀφέντες ἡμιθανῆ. ³¹ κατὰ συγκυρίαν δὲ ἱερεὺς τις κατέβαινε ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ ἐκείνῃ καὶ ἰδὼν αὐτὸν ἀντιπαρήλθεν. ³² ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ Λευίτης [γενόμενος] κατὰ τὸν τόπον ἐλθὼν καὶ ἰδὼν ἀντιπαρήλθεν. ³³ Σαμαρίτης δὲ τις ὁδεύων ἦλθεν κατ' αὐτὸν καὶ ἰδὼν ἐσπλαγχνίσθη, ³⁴ καὶ προσελθὼν κατέδησεν τὰ τραύματα αὐτοῦ ἐπιχέων ἔλαιον καὶ οἶνον, ἐπιβιβάσας δὲ αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τὸ ἴδιον κτῆνος ἤγαγεν αὐτὸν εἰς πανδοχεῖον καὶ ἐπεμελήθη αὐτοῦ. ³⁵ καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν αὐρίον ἐκβαλὼν ἔδωκεν δύο δηνάρια τῷ πανδοχεῖ καὶ εἶπεν· ἐπιμελήθητι αὐτοῦ, καὶ ὁ τί ἂν προσδαπανήσης ἐγὼ ἐν τῷ ἐπανέρχεσθαι με ἀποδώσω σοι. ³⁶ τίς τούτων τῶν τριῶν πλησίον δοκεῖ σοι γεγονέναι τοῦ ἐμπεσόντος εἰς τοὺς ληστές; ³⁷ ὁ δὲ εἶπεν· ὁ ποιήσας τὸ ἔλεος μετ' αὐτοῦ. εἶπεν δὲ αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· πορεύου καὶ σὺ ποιεῖ ὁμοίως. ⁶

Additional thoughts about this text:

With this parable, Jesus answers the lawyer's question. The lawyer might have been looking for the outer limits of his responsibility, but Jesus (as is often the case) does battle with the limits that we seem so often eager to establish. He challenges the lawyer to see neighborliness not as a requirement for entrance into heaven, but as a lifestyle. Which one proved to be neighbor? The one whose compassion knew no limits. The one who was willing to help a mortal enemy. The one who didn't worry about whether or not it was appropriate or necessary or convenient. The one whose response came from deep within.

⁵ St. Luke 10:25-37, New Revised Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

⁶ St. Luke 10:25-37, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).