

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Bill White

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

The Sermon Text — 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 travelling 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.'

SERMON

The lawyer's question to Jesus is at the heart of every search for ultimate meaning. It comes in different forms: How do I find God? What is the path to truth? What is the meaning of life? The same question, from the lips of the lawyer is: What do I need to do to have eternal life? Remember, this lawyer was an expert on religious law, or better, an expert on scripture.

The classical answers to this question appear to fall into two categories. The first goes something like this: Since God is spirit, we must become less physical, less material and take on the life of God by becoming more spiritual. This is the approach of Hinduism. The goal is to reach nirvana, a spiritual state that disconnects us from most things on earth. This understanding is that we should transcend the physical and become like God. We become spiritual. This is done through meditation, deep prayer and focusing on things that are not of this world.

A second answer is: God is justice and truth. We become like God as we embrace a life of justice and truth. As we work for peace, fairness, justice, we are entering into the way of God. One branch of this theory says that we actually find our heaven here on earth – now.

When the man in our story asks Jesus the question Jesus in essence replies: You really know the answer to your own question. Since you are an expert on scripture, what does scripture teach? The man recites what he had memorized long ago and said, "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 said, "Just what I thought. You have long known the answer. Now...do what you already know, and eternal life will be yours."

If this question is indeed the question many people ask: How do I find God? How do I become saved? What is the meaning of life, note the short answer: Love God. Love people.

The religious teacher had no qualms about the loving God part. It implies that a person needs to pray. One form of prayer, the one found in most Lutheran churches is spoken prayer that comes out of silence or meditation. Even the hymns are reflective and calming.

Another form of connection with God comes out of a growing Pentecostal method. This includes excitement, or fervor and consists of joyful, soul-filled singing, uplifting sounds, even movement such as swaying or clapping. Either of these methods of prayer and worship can be accomplished without escaping this world, or becoming a complete spiritual creature.

Step two continues in the same vein. It is: love your neighbor. The neighbor, Jesus says, is the physical expression, the earthly manifestation of God. Jesus was telling the lawyer and us that we meet God not by escaping this world, but by entering deeply into it.

The religious leader did not quibble with the first half of the formula. If I am to meet God I must love God. If I am to inherit eternal life it stands to reason that I must give my entire being to God. But he was not clear about the second part of the equation. Loving our neighbor is a bit messy. Thus he became a bit defensive and asked, "But who is my neighbor?"

I think what he was really asking was, "Who is not my neighbor? He wanted to define neighbor. Do we determine our neighbor geographically? Anyone who lives within one block, with the possible exception of that nosy woman who looks into our house so often that we have learned to pull the blinds, and the grumpy man who blows up if our dog even walks on his grass. Everyone else in the area is our neighbor.

Certainly neighbors do not include beggars on State Street, folks with psychedelic hair or people who live a few blocks away who have yet to learn to speak English? Surely the neighbor could not include our competitors. People from

Cleveland would like to be exempt from loving LaBron James, and people in Green Bay have long ago scratched anyone associated with The Vikings.

Here is a warning: If you want to narrow your definition of neighbor you will get no help from Jesus. In the parable we have come to call, The Good Samaritan, Jesus tells how a traveler was robbed and left for dead on the barren highway between Jerusalem and Jericho. Two church workers, a priest and a man who works in the temple, both of whom had perfectly good excuses to avoid the wounded man avoided him. If either of these two touched the man they would be unclean and unable to go back to work in the temple without a period of cleansing.

Jesus expanded the definition of neighbor by making the hero of this story a Samaritan, that is a person who was an enemy of all Jewish people. Jews were unable to put the words good and Samaritan in the same sentence. It would be like saying, "the good terrorist," or "the good serial killer." Jesus ultimately reversed the original question and asked, "Who acted like a neighbor?" Jesus said, "Sir, you asked the wrong question. It is not, "Who is my neighbor," but rather, "Who am I treating like a neighbor?"

The lawyer answered correctly, "The one who showed mercy."

Jesus told the lawyer and us that the command to love our neighbor cannot be compromised because it is a key to our life with God. It is one half of the answer to the question: "How do we obtain eternal life?" Over and over again Jesus helps us understand that we cannot love God who we cannot see if we don't love our neighbor who we do see." It is not enough to find God through mystical or magical experiences. To be a part of God's world we need to encounter God's creation through human beings. Jesus wants nothing less than for us to live as God lives, touching the lives of those who are muddled and mixed up. This means we are invited not to live with a narrow definition of neighbor, but to include the poor, the dispossessed and strangers.

What Jesus wants is for us to see people in a different way. He isn't dictating what we do for and with others, but he is suggesting that we see all people in need as our brothers and sisters. The two men who passed by on the other side didn't see the man along the road as a friend, a neighbor, a brother or sister. Though he was an enemy, the Samaritan saw the wounded man as a neighbor, a person in need.

The legend of Sir Launfal is the story of a noble knight who decided to leave his castle and search for the Holy Grail, the cup Jesus used at the Last Supper. Tradition told him that only a good and righteous person would be allowed to find it.

The night before his departure he made final preparations. He checked to see that his sword was sharp, his shield polished, and his horse ready. Then he fell asleep.

Soon he began to dream. In the dream it was morning and he was leaving the castle. As he passed through the castle gates he was stopped by a beggar. How annoying! He was about to begin a quest for God, for the Holy Grail,

and did not want to be bothered with a beggar. Sir Launfal flung a penny in his direction and rode on.

Time passed and the knight searched everywhere for the Holy Grail. He fought many battles, but never did Christ even give him a glimpse of the cup which he had used at the Last Supper. Finally, Launfal returned home, a discouraged, beaten old man. As he came within sight of the castle, he saw all the lights ablaze. It was Christmas Eve. Launfal rode up to the guard expecting to join in the celebration taking place inside the castle, but discovered the guard did not recognize him. "No beggars allowed within the castle gates," he shouted and drove Launfal away.

The old knight got stiffly off his horse and sat down in the shelter of the castle wall. It was the night the Christ Child was born, and he was excluded from his own home. Had Christ rejected him altogether?

Just as he was about to eat his last crust of bread, he noticed the same beggar that he had seen so many years ago as he was leaving on his mission! Sir Launfal broke his bread and gave half to the beggar. Then he went to the brook, broke the ice, and got some water for both of them to drink. As they ate together and drank from the old knight's wooden bowl, a strange thing happened. Suddenly the crust of bread tasted fresh and the water tasted like the finest wine! He turned, but the beggar was gone. In his place he saw the shining presence of Christ himself, and he heard Christ saying:

"Not what we give, but what we share, For the gift without the giver is bare; Who gives himself with his alms feeds three Himself, his hungry neighbor, and me."

Sir Launfal looked down at his wooden bowl. It was no longer there. Instead, he held in his hand the Holy Grail, the object of his search.

Then Sir Launfal woke from his sleep. It was morning.

"Put away my sword, and armor," he instructed the servants. "I need not travel to find the Holy Grail, for it is right here in my own castle." He opened wide the gates of his castle, and from that day on, fed the poor and hungry. He welcomed both rich and poor alike and was friendly to all. In his castle all experienced the love and kindness of one who had supper with Christ

What must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus suggests that we know the answer: Love God. Love those around us. Our problem is not that we don't know, but we don't do what we know. If we only act on what we already know – we will live. Amen. © 2010