

Trinity Lutheran Church
13 July 2025 (Fifth Sunday after Pentecost)
Luke 10:25-37

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

29But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, And who is my neighbor?" 30Jesus 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. 31Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34He 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. 35The 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. 36Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" 37He said, The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, Go and do likewise."

This last week I pulled into the parking lot at a local Target and noticed a man using jumper cables to start the car of a woman whose battery died. As I walked by I heard her say to him, "Thank you so much, your a Good Samaritan". Now I doubt that the man was a Samaritan...but he did do a good deed by helping someone he didn't know. This is the common understanding of the Bible story and that's not bad—but there is more to the story.

For starters, the term "Good Samaritan" implies that there are also "Bad Samaritans". There is ample evidence to suggest that Jewish people in the first century believed that all Samaritans are bad...they describe them as dirty, disgusting people with few morals, and bad character. They are to be avoided and certainly are not to be trusted.

Briefly stated, a Samaritan is someone from Samaria. During an Israeli war, more than 500 years before the birth of Jesus, Israel lost and the Babylonians slaughtered many of the Jews living up north in Samaria and enslaved or forced the rest into exile. However, a small number of Jews were left behind because they were deemed to be of no value to the Babylonians even as slaves. All their live stock and farming tools were taken from the and the land was totally decimated by the war. So, as you can imagine, many who were left behind became petty criminals just to survive. Over time these Jews intermarried with other races living in the area mixing their pagan practices with their own Jewish traditions. Long before Jesus came on the scene the "true" Jews who

returned to the promised land, after years in captivity, looked upon the Samaritans as sell-outs, immoral half-breeds, a people who dishonored their race and perverted their Jewish roots and religion. The Samaritans looked to Mt. Gerizim as the holy place to worship God, not Jerusalem, and they lived in communities separate from the other Jews. The animosity between the Jews and Samaritans were so great that some Jews would go miles out of their way to avoid even walking on Samaritan territory. And the distain went both ways. If you recall, in the gospel reading a few weeks ago the Samaritans refused to welcome Jesus when they learned he was headed towards Jerusalem. When they denied Jesus their hospitality -- James and John were quick to urge Jesus to call down fire and annihilate these retched Samaritans. In the mindset of many Jews of Jesus's day the only "good" Samaritan was a dead Samaritan.

Now when I—or you—read this parable, we want to see ourselves as the Good Samaritan. We don't really want to be a Samaritan outcast...but we do want to see ourselves, and have others see us, as "good" people. We so desperately hope to be like the Good Samaritan that we are all too willing to wag our finger in judgement at the others in this story who are not.

But Jesus tells us, "not so fast". He includes a lot of people in this story...and for good reason. The lawyer, the priest, the Levite, the guy left in the ditch, and of course the Samaritan. Out of all these people we want to be like the Good Samaritan, but truth be told, we aren't — at least, not all of the time. So every once in a while, it does our faith good to see ourselves in the shoes of the people whom we do not want to be (or hope we are not). Jesus included these other people in the story not so we can pass judgement on them but perhaps so we can see our own reflection in them and thus be open to our Lord changing us more into his image.

Let's take a hard look at some of these "other" people. The first one we encounter is the lawyer. He is there to "test" Jesus. In many places in the gospels people come to Jesus to test him, that is to trip him up or trap him. Their desire is to make Jesus look foolish and themselves look superior. But what if **this** lawyer is different? What if his testing question is intended to discern if Jesus has something worth paying attention to? I can see myself in that light. Can you? He asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus responds with, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" An excellent question to ask a lawyer...and the lawyer responds correctly. The next question the lawyer asks is, "Who is my neighbor?" And Luke chimes in here and says he asked this question because he sought to justify himself. This reaction isn't unusual or unexpected. I see it as part of our sinful human nature. I hate to admit it but I find myself doing this kind of thing all the time. Like the lawyer we all think of ourselves as basically good people and we constantly justify our behavior even when we know we've done wrong or have not told the whole truth. A cop pulls us over for speeding. We know we're wrong but we still feel a need to justify our behavior. "Oh, I was watching the car in front of me and didn't realize I was going that fast" or "I was just trying to get to work on time". Or how about the wife who says, "You forgot our anniversary!". And the husband replies with, "Oh, I'm so sorry, things are so busy at work and then the car

broke down". You get the picture. Justifying ourselves is not just something this lawyer did...it's something we all do.

Jesus doesn't answer the lawyer's question "who is my neighbor?" directly but instead reveals his answer by telling a story. It begins with a man who is robbed, stripped, beat-up, and lying in a ditch, left for dead. Now, of all the characters in this story this guy laying in the ditch is the one I'd **least** like to be. He's laying there, completely passive, maybe unconscious. He cannot choose whom he would like to help him. He is completely helpless, and at the mercy of others. He cannot even cry out for help. I wouldn't want to be that person but there are times in life when we do find ourselves in that very same position.

Then come a Priest and then a Levite both see the guy in the ditch and pass by on the other side. I know, and you know, that it's the religious authorities who often give Jesus a hard time. But I don't think Jesus is trying to put them down or expose them here as callous towards others. **The priest and the Levite are stand-ins for you and I.** They are people—they are us—at our best. The common people considered priests and Levites as worthy examples of good and moral people. The priest and the Levite who passed on the other side weren't bad or evil people kicking dirt in the face of someone who is down...these are good people, who no doubt had good reasons, for passing by on the other side. For them, and sometimes for us if we're not careful, the church can function as a sophisticated parlor game to keep us occupied while we avoid actually *doing* anything for anyone. Again, I'm not proud of it, but I can see my own reflection all too often in the actions, and inactions, of the priest and the Levite.

It is only now in the story that we encounter the Samaritan. Despised by others, and perhaps because of that, he responds differently. The two, the priest and the Levite widened the distance between themselves and the man in the ditch. They would not come near to him. They would not be a good neighbor to him. The third, the Samaritan comes near. As Jesus tells the story the Samaritan first comes near to the poor guy and **then** sees him and having compassion rendered him aid.

Remember, Jesus is answering the lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor". The word "neighbor" in any language means "someone who is close by". In this story it is only the Samaritan who made the decision to come close by the man in the ditch and thus was a neighbor to him.

This Samaritan was the sort of person who comes near people and sees them, rather than like the others who see people and moves away from them. The Samaritan, when he dared to come close, found he was moved with compassion and did what he could to help the injured man lying in the ditch.

You know, we expend a lot of energy in our lives deciding to be detached and disengaged from others—and creating good logical reasons for doing so. Sometimes these decisions are very much justified. We detach ourselves from others for our own safety or the safety of those in our care. We detach and disengage from others to keep

from becoming burned-out and overwhelmed with other people's problems. There is nothing wrong with that.

Even Jesus from time to time went away from the crowds to spend some time alone. But there are other times when we keep our distance for less noble reasons. We sometimes keep our distance because we don't want to become involved in other people's misery or we fear the commitment that stems from becoming close to other people. Or we may keep our distance because we don't want to change or be interrupted.

The answer to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" means, according to Jesus, to dare to come near to others. Your neighbor is not just the person living next door — in a house you never have to enter, into which you might never be invited, to whom you never have to speak to. Your neighbor is not one who happens to be convenient for you to help. Your neighbors are not only those whose speech and behaviors are predictable and acceptable to you. Your neighbor is not the one who meets your standard of being worthy of your company.

No, says Jesus. Your neighbor is anyone who is experiencing pain, struggles, challenges, and sorrow and regardless of anything else you draw near to them. Your neighbor is someone who clearly has needs and you decide—like the Samaritan did—that you will help them as best you are able. Your neighbor is someone who might even reject your assistance but you insist on helping them anyway.

God's choice to become human is just such an act—a commitment to closeness, a desire to close the distance that separated the divine from us mortal and flawed human beings. In Jesus God himself draws near to us. He becomes our neighbor.

After telling this story Jesus says to the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" And again the lawyer has the right answer, "The one who showed him mercy." The lawyer once again gets the answer right, but did he then follow Jesus' directive to, "Go and do likewise?" Luke doesn't tell us. We will never know. This is Luke's way of telling us, his readers, that it is our calling to finish the story.

Yes, we can see all too clearly our own reflection in the actions of the priest and the Levite and at times we may even feel like the guy who is beat-up and lying in the ditch. And like the lawyer at other times we too may have all the right answers. But it is the Samaritan, despised by the world, who came close to the one who was suffering that Jesus calls us to imitate. His final words to the lawyer in the story is also Jesus's final words to us today, "Go and do likewise." AMEN.