

## Sermon for Trinity 13 – Luke 10:23-37

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Who is Jesus? It's a question that many have sought to answer throughout the ages. A lawyer back in Jesus' time quite accidentally found the answer. "And behold, a lawyer stood up to put [Jesus] to the test." This lawyer was a specialist, yes an expert in religious law. A lawyer's job, both then and now, is to find out the truth. How does a lawyer accomplish this? He asks questions. To find that truth, this lawyer asks his first question: "What shall I *do* to *inherit* eternal life?" However, his question is flawed. What can anyone *do* to inherit *anything*? Inheritance, by its very nature is a gift from one family member (or friend) to another. If you are born into a family, or perhaps adopted into it, than you can inherit. Inheritance is not a payment for services rendered. There's nothing you do to earn an inheritance – it's pure gift! Eternal life is such an inheritance!

But, strangely, Jesus points this lawyer to the Ten Commandments – the moral law, which is, by definition, all about what we do, all about what we earn, and all about what we accomplish. "What is written in the law? How do you read it?" "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." "...Do this and you shall live." Is Jesus saying salvation and eternal life can be earned?!? Well, it's true, isn't it?!? Anyone who can meet such a standard as loving God with all their being and loving their neighbor as themselves has no need of grace. So how has that worked out for us? Have we ever lied or lusted? Have we ever been disobedient or spiteful to our parents? Have we ever desired what others had? Have we ever spoken a word in hatred? Ever gossiped? Or ever used God's name as a curse word?

The problem is not with the law. The problem is with us. We cannot keep it. The standard set by God eludes our finest efforts. "What shall I *do* to *inherit* eternal life?" It's as if Christ answers, "Jump over this 10 story building." The lawyer (and us!) should see that we can't jump that high.

Nonetheless, to find that truth, the lawyer goes to a new question. He thinks, "So, I must love God and my neighbor to earn my salvation. Fine, what I need now is a few definitions. To love God is to keep the law. I already know that. What I need now is some clarification of *exactly* who is and who is not my neighbor. Once I have clarification on this point I can proceed." So, desiring to justify himself, he asks, "Who is my neighbor?" To justify is to be saved and to be saved is to inherit eternal life. How can I inherit eternal life for myself?

The only foreseeable way to justify oneself is to redefine the law, to whittle it down until it's manageable, to lower the bar so it can be easily jumped over. "If I can define God apart from what He expects from me in His law, if I can define my neighbor as only those whom I want to love, in the way I want to love them, and when I want to love them, then sure, I can keep the law." I can even say, "I'm keeping the law better than that person over there." But God's law says something else. "You mean, I have to love that spiteful and overbearing woman, always? I have to love that hard-headed and stubborn man, all the time?" Yep! And even love your enemies, too! Have you done it? God's law condemns us. But, is there another way to eternal life?

To give the answer, Jesus tells a parable--perhaps even his most famous parable: the parable of the Good Samaritan. Robbers take a man's possessions and leave him to die along the road. An Old

Testament priest traveled on the same road and saw the beaten man. Most priests were wealthy, so this one likely was riding on a horse or donkey as he passed by the half-beaten man on the other side of the road. "Was this man dead?" perhaps the priest wondered to himself. If so, even touching the man would have made the priest ceremonially unclean, which meant no work for at least a week. Moreover, if the man was an Egyptian, Greek, or any other non-Jew, he had no legal obligation to help him. Nevertheless, it was the priest's job to carry the cares and hardships of the people to God-- a task which he neglected for the wounded man.

Next a Levite passes by. Levites functioned as the assistants to the priests. No doubt this Levite carried the oil, the wine, the fine linens, and the other items necessary for the priest to perform his sacred rituals. But oil and wine were also used commonly to treat wounds in first century Judea. So, the Levite passes by, withholding his help from the injured man.

But then an unlikely hero comes on to the scene. A Samaritan--one of those half-breed Jews-- journeys down the same road and helps the injured man. Samaritans were the result of North Kingdom Jews intermarrying with regional non-Jewish groups. Needless to say, full-blooded Jews counted Samaritans as outsiders at best. And yet, this outsider came in and used all his available resources to help the half-dead man. He used his oil, wine, clothes, donkey, time, energy, and money to care for the wounded man. He did what the priest failed to do. He did what the Levite failed to do. He, a Samaritan, even risks his own life by transporting a wounded man into a Jewish town and entrusts him to the care of an innkeeper. It's not much longer until we realize that in the Good Samaritan, Jesus is really talking about Himself.

Who is Jesus? He is the Godly Samaritan--the Divine Half-breed, for He is fully God and fully Man. He comes from outside of us to bind up our wounds. He carries us along the treacherous road of this world. He entrusts us to the care of the church on earth. He speaks His Words of forgiveness to you today and you are healed! He pours His wine into you and you are forgiven! He gives even more resources than the parable's Good Samaritan because He paid the ultimate price: His very life into death on a cross for you! He died and death cannot harm you! He kept the Law perfectly so the Law's accusations cannot bind you! Jesus forgives you and your sins are completely destroyed! That's why we rejoice, that's why we have joy, because we are sinners-- but sinners forgiven by Jesus!

And so you are forgiven and you are free. Free to ask the question: "Who is my neighbor?" or more accurately, "To whom must I *become* a neighbor?" The answer? Anyone in need. Your neighbor is anyone in need. The ethical demands of this statement are limitless! But, then again, God puts needful neighbors right in front of you. Go to school! You'll find others who need to hear Jesus takes away their sins! Go to work! You'll find people who are dying to hear that Christ died for them! Go to church! Needful neighbors all around! Go home! There you'll find people who need to hear Christ's forgiveness from you!

Jesus asked, "Which of these three [the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan], do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" [The lawyer] said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' And Jesus said to him, 'You go, and do likewise.'" Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠