

## NOT NEGOTIABLE: Love

Let's read Luke's account of a brief encounter between Jesus a teacher of religious law. (LK 10.25-28)... Packs a punch, that scene, doesn't it? The teacher wants eternal life. Jesus says to get it you need to love your God and love your neighbor. But it's not even Jesus who says he needs to love. It's the teacher who says it. Jesus just confirms it.

One of the amazing things about this scene is that it starts out with the teacher's having less than noble intentions. V.25 says, he stood up to test Jesus. He's not asking because he doesn't know, or because he's curious about how Jesus thinks. He's asking to put Jesus on the spot, to say to him, how much do you know, wise guy? How well do you really understand the scriptures?

So the teacher's intentions are not pure. But in an instant, Jesus renders the teacher's intentions moot! Jesus turns the entire Q&A around - reverses the questioner/questioned name tags - and says to the teacher, how do you read it? Who's being tested now? It isn't Jesus.

That's an interesting aspect of this short scene, but it's not the reason I have us look at it today. I raise the scene so that we can pay attention to the parable it prompts. See, I didn't read the whole story. Some of you might have noticed that I left off a verse or many. V.29....

Wanting to justify himself, wanting to prove that he passed the test... that he thought he was going to administer to Jesus.... he asks Jesus one more question. Who is my neighbor?

One more sidelight about this scene. It begins with the teacher's intending to test Jesus. It rapidly turns into the teacher's pursuit of affirmation of his own spiritual life. It's as if I have the following conversation with Jesus: ...

I say: Jesus, what do I have to do to have eternal life?

Jesus: What do you think you have to do, Bill.

Me: Well, let's see, I think I have to love God and love others.

Jesus: Good, Bill. That's the secret!

ME: *(to myself - Oh goodness. I don't know that I've loved everybody.)* (to Jesus) Jesus, if I'm supposed to love my neighbor, who exactly is my neighbor? *(Please tell me my neighbor is someone I've already loved, or plan to love, or will be willing to love!)*

Hear the turnaround? The teacher wants to test Jesus, but ends up testing his own grip on life.

And then comes Jesus' answer to the man. If you have a Bible open in front of you, you know what comes next. Jesus responds to the teacher's question with this.... (v.30) It's the parable of the good Samaritan. Now that title rolls off our tongues if we know much of anything about Jesus' teachings. It's a story about a man who's beaten up and another man who finds him by the side of the road, collects him, takes him to care, and promises to pay for that care when he comes back. But when we summarize the story THAT way, we miss its punch in at least two ways.

The first way we miss its punch is that such a summary fails to mention the other characters in the story. There's a priest who walks by the assault victim and does nothing to help. In fact, the story says, the priest moves to the other side of the road to avoid having to do anything for the man who had been beaten.

But he's not the only one. After the priest, another religious leader - a temple assistant, the New Living Translation calls him - walks by the man who had been assaulted, and THAT religious leader also moves to the other side of the road to avoid having anything to do with man.

So prior to the arrival of man who helped the assaulted guy, there were two other people who came by - religious folks, people who we'd expect to try to help - but did nothing. But there's more about the characters in the story.

The guy who stops to help - the one who didn't move to the other side of the road - is a Samaritan! We learn why that detail matters in v.33 of Luke 10.... A despised Samaritan. Jews - of whom the beaten man was one - and Samaritans didn't get along. They didn't keep company. If you were of either group and found yourself in the company of the other, you were on the wrong side of the tracks. And yet, it's a Samaritan who transports the man to care.

One way a short summary of the good Samaritan story can miss its punch is by failing to note the other characters in the story. The other ways it can miss its punch is by failing to connect the story with the scene that introduces it. Remember the teacher who asked Jesus what he had to do to have inherit eternal life, the guy who then answered his own question by saying he had to love God and love neighbor. Here's the kicker: The good Samaritan story in part, reports what Jesus means by loving people!

In our culture, and perhaps in our personal hopes and dreams, love is heart emojis added to text messages. Love is what we feel for family members, at least some portion of our family members, at any given time. In our culture, in our walk-around set of assumptions about the term, love is what we feel for people we know, we like, people who mean something to us, who have a place in our lives. Many people think of love as a warm fuzzy we feel when we think of a special someone - a spouse, a sibling, a great friend. Jesus says you should indeed love those people, but you need to expand your love's recipient list to include not just people you know, but people you don't know. And not just people you don't know, but people you're not comfortable with, people you don't think you belong with, people on the other side of the tracks from you.

The command to love your neighbor as yourself is not a threat because of the word neighbor. It's a threat because of the word love, because to love, the story says, means to extend yourself, to expose yourself to new realities, it means to leave your comfort zone, to reach out to people different from you, it means to extend care, concern, compassion to people to whom you didn't grow up thinking you were going to extend care, concern, and compassion.

It's there in the story, folks; we can't avoid it. After delivering to the teacher the good news that he can live, he can have eternal life, Jesus gives him an example of how he can do that. And if the teacher follows the example Jesus gives him, he will care about people and act in service to people no one told him about when he was a kid, because that's what it means to love your neighbor - because your neighbor isn't just the person living next door to you. Your neighbor is the next person in need you meet. Whatever she looks like, whatever he needs, and whether you're friends with him or her or not.

We're closing in on the end of our series called not negotiable in which we're talking about the actions and attitudes we must have if we're to follow Jesus. Some things are negotiable. Whether you're a Catholic or Protestant or Greek Orthodox. Negotiable. Whether you worship, whether you have a mission, whether you live and give grace, not negotiable. And today, whether you love as defined by Jesus, not by you or me, is not negotiable.

I think I should have added a sermon to this series, one that said, Jesus is not negotiable. The more we study the Gospels, the more confounding the man is in his teachings. Sometimes we just want to go to church, be a nice person, live a good life, and then go heaven. But Jesus doesn't negotiate his teachings with us. He says, I will welcome you to heaven. Go ahead and look forward to that. But until we meet there, then, right here and now I want you to live this way. And its not negotiable.

You and I will encounter a neighbor this week - a neighbor defined Jesus' way. We as a church did last week, too. A gentleman called asking for help. We have a ministry in which we give a small offering to people in need. He was our neighbor that day. We probably will never see that guy again, but that day he was our neighbor, and we helped him - it was not negotiable.

The veterans we serve through Helmets of Hope. We've only ever seen one of the more than 300 we've helped. Yet every one of them was our neighbor whom Jesus commanded us to love.

I don't know who your neighbor will be this week. But you will meet one. I don't know whom you will meet, but I do know how Jesus commands you to respond to the need you see. With love that crosses the tracks, that serves the unfamiliar, that provides when no one else will. That's the story of the good Samaritan. Let it be our story and your story this week.