

Who Is My Neighbor?

Luke 10:25-37

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

July 14, 2013 – Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

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In the name of the Father, and † of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Over the years Theologians and Bible scholars have debated – and indeed, still debate – over precisely what this account of the Good Samaritan means. Some believe Jesus is here giving us an example to pattern our own lives after – how we are to treat our neighbor with the same generosity and compassion he showed to the man beaten by robbers and left for dead on the side of the road. After all, doesn't Jesus conclude this story with a command to the expert in the Law that he "go and do likewise?" Other Bible scholars, however, claim that such a reading of this Gospel is too superficial. If a person is going to identify with the Good Samaritan, this Gospel offers precious little in the way of comfort and the forgiveness of sins. They claim it's far better to see one's self not as the Good Samaritan, but as the beaten, dying man languishing by the side of the road.

The Good Samaritan for them isn't some moral ideal for us to follow, but instead a picture of our Lord Jesus Himself. The Samaritan was an outcast in Jewish society, unwelcomed by the Jews. The Samaritans and the Jews were sworn enemies, yet the Good Samaritan in this parable saves the life of the one who was his enemy. So also, you and I were once counted as enemies of God, yet we were saved by the very One Whom we once hated. Jesus, our Good Samaritan found us lying in a heap on the roadside of sin and death, and out of His own love for the unlovable He had compassion on us. Christ is the Good Samaritan who worked through the night of darkness and death to bring us healing through His suffering, death and resurrection. It was out of the riches of His own existence as True God and True Man that Jesus, by His own death, spared our life from the certain death we all deserve by reason of our sin.

So, should we read this account as Law which tells us we must also be Good Samaritans to one another if we are to have any hope of being saved? Or, should we read it as Gospel, proclaiming the grace and mercy of God which has been shown to us poor sinners in Christ? Luther refused to get caught up in this debate. If you were to ask him,

"Does the Good Samaritan represent us, and does it show us how we must love and treat our neighbor?" Luther would have responded, "Yes." And if you were to ask, "But what about the beaten man," Luther also would have responded, "Yes, he represents you too." That may not make a whole lot of sense to our modern mindset – that is, that God in this Gospel would identify us both with the Good Samaritan *and* with the roadside victim – but the problem lies more in the narrow way our minds work, not in the lavish, rich way whereby our God speaks. So, when Luther preached on this text in the year 1533, he declared:

"Let us learn something from this. This Samaritan treats the poor man as he himself would have wanted to be treated. He would have been eager to have someone dress his wounds, had he been injured. Just as he loves himself, so he in turn loves the poor man and thus reaps the commendation that he loves God and his neighbor. This is also what we should be doing. For this fruit should be present in Christians who have God's Word. If not, they are hypocrites, like this priest and Levite. They are wooden saints, yes, devil-saints. For the one who neglects his neighbor also neglects God. Let us therefore beware of the example which is being set by the world, which hates both God and neighbor!" Then again, only one year later, Luther once again preached on this parable, saying that from it "we are to learn that all of mankind likewise lies wounded, smitten and despoiled by the devil through sin. And if the Samaritan, that is, our dear Lord Jesus Christ, does not bind up our wounds and carry us on His back, we must all perish. The priest and Levite pass us by; the Law helps us not at all."

So, how should you read this Gospel? Should you see yourself as the Good Samaritan, the wounded man, or as some other character? The answer, dear Christian, is "Yes!" As Christians and hearers of the divine Word, you must ask yourself, "What does this mean?" – not, "What is my opinion of this text?" or, "Do I like what God is saying here?" You are to ask nothing more than, "What does this mean?" And yet, in order to get at the

“What does this mean?” in today’s Gospel, you have to move about through the text and allow it to do its two-pronged, Law *and* Gospel work on your heart. You have to allow it both to convict you of your sin and likewise rejoice in the healing of your own wounds as you consider all that God in Christ has done to save us from sin, death and the devil.

Are you like one the robbers, who, on the road to Jericho, heartlessly fell upon this innocent man and beat him within an inch of his life? Have there been times when you set out specifically and intentionally to hurt or harm your neighbor in any way – be he a co-worker, a spouse, a friend, an enemy, or even one of your own siblings? Have any of your actions toward your neighbor ever been intended only for evil and not good? The smallest amount of honesty will require that you – along with me – answer in the affirmative. At this point in today’s Gospel, Jesus has spoken only two sentences, and already we stand guilty of murder.

But what about the priest and the Levite? Perhaps you’re so consumed with your own maintenance that you don’t even notice or care about your neighbor’s misfortune and struggles. Perhaps you’re so preoccupied with your own life, interests, problems, and the pursuit of happiness that you simply don’t have the time or desire to love your neighbor. You see him lying there in great need, but you simply don’t have the energy to deal with him right now. So you pass him by on the other side of the road, as it were.

Maybe you think you are one of those rare souls who can identify with the Good Samaritan – that you’re one of those who genuinely seek to find ways to help your neighbor – who gives whatever is necessary, no matter the cost. Maybe you see yourself as willing to pay a future debt for your neighbor’s sake – for indeed, that *is* what the Good Samaritan did. “Look after him,” he told the innkeeper, “and when I return, I’ll reimburse you for any extra expense you may have incurred.” Myself, however, I find a different law at work within me – the law of which St. Paul speaks in Romans 7: “For the good that I want to do I do not do, but what I hate to do is what I find myself doing. For I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I desire to do good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do – no, the evil I do not want to do, this is what I keep on doing.”

So, this familiar parable of the Good Samaritan, then – which I previously thought I knew so well – has thus far not painted a very pretty picture of me. And it hasn’t spoken very well of you, either. Still, there’s one final character with whom we all can – and must – identify. Not only is it possible to see ourselves as thieves, priests, Levites, or Good Samaritans, but also we must finally see ourselves as the poor man who lies beaten by the side of the road. This is where our enemies have left us. This is where our own sin has left us. This is where God’s condemning Law has left us. When it comes to loving our neighbor – and yes, when it comes to loving God – we are as unable to do this with any strength or conviction as the man who had been reduced to unconsciousness, stripped, beaten, and left “half dead.”

But the Good News is that our Good Samaritan has come looking for you to bind and treat your wounds. He hasn’t left you all alone lying by the side of the road, but instead He’s given your care to an innkeeper, so to speak. He’s placed you in the Holy Christian Church. He’s given you many good and gracious gifts intended to build up your faith and heal your wounds while you wait for our Good Samaritan’s return. Your eternal life receives its sustenance here in this Church – at this inn, as it were – where your wounds are washed in the holy flow of Baptismal water – where you’re nourished, strengthened and built up with the bread of God’s Word – where you receive the forgiveness of sins through confession and absolution – where you’re fed with the heavenly feast of our Good Samaritan’s Holy Supper, which consists of his very own body and blood given and shed for us sinners to eat and drink for the forgiveness of our sins.

Rest here at this inn, dear saints of God. Rest here with the assurance that our Good Samaritan – your Hero, your Savior, and your Provider – will return to finish and complete the work He once began in your life. Find here at this Table the rest and strength you need – and don’t worry about the cost. Our Good Samaritan has left it on His tab. He’s already paid the price to save you. In His Word He has given you the assurance that He will return on the Last Day to bring You home to live with Him in the heavenly mansions of His Father and your Father. And because our Good Samaritan’s Word is sure, you can count on it with your very life. He *will* bring it to pass according to His promise. In Jesus’ name. Amen.