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On the Gospel for July 10, 2016, Luke 10 25-37

Beloved of God:

St. Luke tells us in the Gospel for today that a lawyer, that is, a scholar of the law of Moses, is seeking a way to justify himself when he asks Jesus who is his neighbor whom the law says he must love as himself. His reason for asking is that he wants to limit his ethical liability.

He has grounds for questioning who the neighbor is whom he obligated to love. A neighbor is someone near you. Well, how near? Your family living in your house with you are the closest. The person next door is usually called a neighbor. But how far away can the person be and claim to be your neighbor. Would it include everyone in your community, your neighborhood, or everyone in your town? The Mosaic law as it is written in Leviticus uses a word for neighbor that means someone with whom you are associated, with you have some kind of bond. That could be taken broadly as everyone who lives under the same national government as you.

You might get the impression that the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself is a command to love on a sliding scale. The closer people are to you, the more you should love them; the farther away they are either in distance or affiliation, the less you need to love them.

Of course, the closer people are to you, the more benefit you get from loving them. Loving members of your family builds a strong caring family for you. Loving your next-door neighbor, makes a good and pleasant neighbor for you. Loving your community helps to make your community a pleasant place to live. Loving your nation and nationality, supports the nation that protects and supports you. With this logic, loving your neighbor as yourself would mean love your neighbor in order to love yourself. And, of course, there is some wisdom in that.

But Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan cuts through any limits on who the neighbor is. The Samaritan who comes to the aid of the man beaten by robbers and left half dead on the roadside, does not inquire who this man is, whether he is a fellow-Samaritan, or whether he knows him from any previous dealings. The only reason he helps them, according to the story, is that he has compassion for him. The word in the text is that he felt for him, he could feel what this man was suffering there on the roadside. He could see and feel for him, because he knew the hazards on this road; he knew the same thing could happen to him. He felt a bond with him in his misfortune. He did not stop to help the man because he calculated it was within his

ethical duty; he helped him because he had compassion on him. So the issue is for whom do we or should we or can we have compassion.

In the early church, the Good Samaritan in this story was seen as a figure of Christ. Christ sees us lying beaten and half dead because of the blows of others or the blows we inflict on ourselves. He lifts us up from the road we have traveled and takes us to the inn of the community of God's people. There we are cared for and set in a new life with God and in a loving community. He pays the debt our misdeeds have earned us and promises to return to be sure we are secure in God's family.

But you know that Christ's meeting us on the road is more profound than just happening to meet us on the road of our life's journey. We say in our creed every Sunday that that Christ himself was incarnate, that is, he took on our flesh. He was truly human. It is clear in the writings of those who formulated the creed that they did not mean that Christ took on the flesh of one privileged individual, Jesus of Nazareth. They meant that he took on all human flesh; Christ is God in all humankind and Christ's suffering is to be understood as God suffering with humankind. The man robbed and beaten and left half-dead on the roadside is Christ, who was scorned and beaten and left dead on the cross.

Christ has compassion on us because knows our suffering and pain. According to the book of Exodus, God said to Moses, "I have seen the misery of my people who are in Egypt, I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings." How did God know their sufferings? The New Testament tells us that God knows our sufferings in Christ. God takes on our flesh and knows our suffering in Christ. Christ does not rescue us as a stranger who does not know us. Christ is familiar with our pain and suffering, and is at pain with us. In his wounds we find healing; in his death we find resurrection and new life. Christ is both the Good Samaritan who rescues us and the one is rescued. His death and resurrection encompasses us all, and brings us to new life.

But we must return to the question of the lawyer, who then is my neighbor? What has become of the lawyer's attempt to limit his ethical liability? In Christ we are bound to all those who share human flesh with us, since in Christ God is in all human flesh. We, like Christ, are both ones who have met misfortune on our journeys and been rescued, as well as Good Samaritans who have compassion for all who share our flesh and vulnerability.