

"Being Neighborly"  
Luke 10:25-37

July 10, 2016

8<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

Being neighborly is a friendly sort of thing which many Americans do that doesn't seem too difficult. All you have to do is meet the person or family that lives next door or down the block. It should be pretty easy. Most people are decent folks. Then all you have to do smile, wave, or exchange pleasantries about the weather when you happen to be outside at the same time. That's considered "being neighborly". It may not be much, but its light, friendly, and more than a lot of folks do these days.

Leave it to a lawyer to complicate matters in our Gospel for today. While Jesus was teaching, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test. Was he trying to trap Jesus or was he sincerely testing Jesus' knowledge of Scripture? We don't know. But the lawyer poses a very common and important question: "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

This is a question, although it may be phrased slightly differently, which many people ask today. People will say, "What shall I do to be right with God?" or "How can go to heaven?" or "How can I live forever?" Like with the lawyer's question, the assumption is that the answers to these questions is always dependent on something we have to do. Another assumption is that we can actually do whatever we have to do if we just try hard enough.

What's the answer? Jesus wisely avoids becoming entrapped by this question. Instead, He shows Himself to be a very wise teacher. He throws the question back in the face of the lawyer. "What is written in the Law?" Jesus asks him. "How do you read it?" This expert in the Law answers, "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."

Jesus' answer is quite straightforward: "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." In other words, if you want to base your hope for eternal life on what YOU must do, this is what the Law of God says you must do. Do it and you will live. Many people today might think this sounds like a reasonable ethical position: love God and be nice to other people – to those who are near to you, your neighbors. But the Law requires more than that. You are to love God with all that you have in your heart, soul, strength, and mind – your entire being – and you are love your neighbor as much as you love yourself.

This is getting to be tougher than the lawyer anticipated. He "seems to realize the impossibility of fulfilling the commandments [he] just cited." (LSB note, p.1735) He desires to justify himself – show that he can still do this – by trying to find a way to limit the demands of God's commands. He doesn't say anything about the requirement to love God with all that he had. As a religious leader, he may have thought that he was already doing that adequately. Instead, he asks, "And who is my neighbor?" In other words, who do I have to love to fulfill this commandment? And who do I NOT have to love?

We might think like this lawyer. We love God enough – don't we? By using the term, "neighbor", the Law is surely limiting the list of those we are required to love to those close to us geographically, emotionally, and spiritually, right? If we can just keep on loving God in the vague sort of way which we have been doing and love the nice people near to us, we should be just fine. But that's not true. Jesus tells a story in response to the lawyer's question which is devastating to his attempts and our attempts to soften the Law of God and become right with Him by it. It's a story commonly known as "The Good Samaritan."

The story begins with a Jewish man being robbed, beaten and left for dead. A good neighbor would be a fellow Jew who would come to his aid. But both a priest and a Levite pass him by without doing anything to help the wounded man. A bad neighbor would be a hated foreigner who would avoid the wounded man and do nothing to help him. But that's exactly who shows up: a Samaritan man. A typical neighbor might wish a neighbor well without getting too involved. But this Samaritan man had compassion and got involved. He administered first aid, brought the man to an inn, took care of him, and paid the innkeeper for a future aid that was needed.

Instead of clarifying the matter for the lawyer, it only confused him and showed how hopeless his attempt to limit the scope of God's Law. It shows how hopeless our situation is, too. It overlooks the fact that we are to love God with all that we have - all of our heart, all of our soul, all of our strength, and all of our mind. And we are to do it all the time. There's no way we can do that.

The story shows us that loving our neighbor is no easier. That love is shown to all people – those near and far; those we really like and those who annoy us or are our enemies. This love is to be more than smiles and handshake. It is to be shown in word and deed – in becoming deeply involved in helping those in need, no matter how much it costs us. And, like loving God, it is to be done all the time.

The lawyer had asked, "And who is my neighbor?" After telling the story, Jesus changes the question slightly. He says, "Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" Instead of asking "Who do I have to be a neighbor to?", ask, "Who was the neighbor to the man in need?"

We should ask in the same way. Instead of asking, "To whom am I to be a neighbor? ask, "Who is to be a neighbor to me?" When we read this story, we like to plug ourselves into the story in the part of the Good Samaritan as being the nice neighbor who helps all people in need. But, as we look around at the violence in our streets, the conflicts and killings of citizens by the police and the conflicts and killings of police by citizens, we see behavior more like the robbers in the story, rather than the Samaritan.

Even as we look into our own heart and at our own behavior, we see our lack of consistent and complete love for God, as well as our inconsistent and limited care for other people. We do not measure up to the Samaritan. Our part in this story is that of the man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. We have been overcome and beaten down by Satan and sin, powerless to defend ourselves or fight off our attackers. They have left us for dead along the side of the road of life. In fact, we are in even worse shape than the man in the story. We don't just appear to be dead. We are truly and completely spiritually dead. No pastor or religious person could help us, even if they wanted to.

Our Samaritan – the one who was despised and rejected by men – Jesus Christ comes to our aid. He becomes our neighbor by leaving His throne in heaven and becoming one of us by taking on our flesh and blood. He washes away the wounds of our sin with His own blood, shed on the cross. He restores us to life with the life He gained in His resurrection from the dead. He leads us to the church where He continues to care for us by forgiving us our sins and strengthening our spiritual lives. He leaves His Word and His Sacraments to His Church for our continued care. And He promises to come back.

Instead of trying so hard to decide who our neighbor is and isn't and how much love and care we have to or don't have to share with those who are our neighbors, let us allow Jesus to be our neighbor. We are fully and completely restored to spiritual life and health by Him in our baptisms. We are filled with His love and Spirit by His Word. We are strengthened in our faith toward Him and in fervent love for one another by His Holy Communion.

It is then and only then that we can truly be neighbors to others. Having received Jesus' neighborliness to us, we are ready to "go, and do likewise" to others. Our neighborliness knows no limits. It is not limited to those who are near us; those who like us; those who are like us or those who are neighborly to us. We are neighbors to those who are far away; those who don't like us; those whose skin color, economic standing, and culture are different than ours; and those who reject us. It is a neighborliness, not based on words, feelings, or superficiality but on actions, dedication and involvement. It is a love and neighborliness not of our own, but Jesus' love and neighborliness flowing through us to others.

Being a neighbor biblically is much different than being a neighbor in our culture today. It is more expansive, more involved, and more difficult. But, since Jesus has been our perfect neighbor, He now equips and empowers each of us to be neighbors to anyone and everyone. As you have experienced His neighborliness to you and have received the power of His Holy Spirit from Him, "go, and do likewise." Amen