



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity

St. Luke 10:23-37

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Our Gospel this morning is another familiar parable. And familiarity isn't always a good thing. It can lead us to read the Bible out of its context and we can often end up assuming we already know what the parable is all about and we fail to let Jesus' stories speak to us in the way they were meant to. A big part of that is that we read these parables as if Jesus spoke them directly to us, forgetting that he actually spoke them to very different people in a very different setting two millennia ago. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a great example of all this. Christians read it almost universally as a story meant to instruct us in morals, but in doing that we ignore not only the immediate context, but also the larger ministry of Jesus. Jesus was not a moral teacher. That's not to say that he didn't teach about morality and ethics, but when he did it was as part of his ministry as the Messiah and in the role of a prophet to the covenant people of God, to Israel. It's important to remember the narrative, the big picture—the story of God and his people. It's important to remember what Jesus said of himself in John 3: "I came not to condemn, but to redeem." This is where he came into conflict with people like the Pharisees. They—and most of the rest of Israel—expected that when the Messiah came, he would bring history to its climax. He would rain down the Lord's judgement on gentiles and sinners—on the nations—he would set righteous Israel on top of the heap where she belonged, and he would set this fallen world to rights as King. He would usher in the long-awaited age to come. And they were right. This is what Jesus will do—more or less—at history's climax. But what no one—or almost no one—had anticipated is that the Messiah would come in the *middle*

of history to prepare the people for his eventual coming at the *end*—that he would come in the middle of history in order to bring redemption to sinners, in order to set his people to rights, *so that* they could *avoid* the coming day of judgement and know the life of the age to come. That's what so many of these parables are about. The people were looking forward to judgement coming on sinners, but Jesus was actually eating and drinking with sinners and told stories to remind the Pharisees that the Lord rejoices when the lost are found—and that they ought not only to be joyful when their lost brothers and sisters are found and reconciled to God, but that just maybe they ought to make assisting in that effort a priority themselves. Shouldn't God's people be concerned about their own lost brothers and sisters? If you're not, well, you've misunderstood what it means to be the people of God. Not only that, but there's something wrong with your heart. And since judgement was coming—Jesus' eschatological horizon was always the war with Rome and the destruction of Jerusalem that would come in about forty years—since judgement was coming, you'd better do something about this lest you find yourself on the wrong side of that judgement.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is one of these stories. Now, unlike some other parables, it's hard here to avoid the immediate setting that prompts Jesus to tell this story. This lawyer puts Jesus to the test. On the one hand, he stands—a sign of respect—and he addresses Jesus as *rabbi*. But he does this "to test him", Luke says. This lawyer, at least, has reservations about Jesus. There really is something messianic about Jesus, but he was doing so many things *wrong*. And he asks, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He's not asking, "How do I go to heaven when I die." That's a question that just wasn't on the radar of any First Century Jew. Again, think of the narrative. The Messiah would usher in God's new age. He would judge the nations and restore Israel to her rightful place. Our common English translation "eternal life" obscures what the lawyer was getting at. He's asking what a Jew must do to inherit, to have a place in the life

of the age to come, in the messianic kingdom.

Now, in a way it's a silly question and everyone already knew the answer. You don't *do* anything to receive an inheritance. Israel's inheritance was based on God's election of her as his people. In the Old Testament they typically talked about this inheritance in terms of the land. And they didn't do anything to get it. It was the Lord who led them out of Egypt and into Canaan, and it was the Lord who vanquished the Canaanites. They didn't do anything to possess it, *but* the way to keep it was faithfulness to their covenant with the Lord. They didn't do anything to inherit it, but they could do something to lose it. When they didn't keep their end of the covenant, when they disregarded the law and worshiped false gods, the Lord took it away. The northern kingdom of Israel ceased to exist. The southern kingdom, Judah, was defeated and the people exiled. And note, it was the Lord who returned them to the land when they'd learned their lesson. So for Israel to keep her inheritance meant faithfulness to *torah*, to the law. And as time went on and the messianic hope grew, the inheritance of the land became the inheritance of the age to come. And so we have someone like Hillel, a *rabbi* contemporary with Jesus, writing, "Who has gained for himself words of Torah has gained for himself the life of the world to come."¹

But from the perspective of a lot of people, Jesus was messing this up. They all knew that they would have a place in the age to come because they were faithful to the law. Those who weren't faithful—people like the tax collectors and sinners—would lose their inheritance and be left outside, wailing and gnashing their teeth. But then along came Jesus—whom his people said was the Messiah—and instead of sending sinners away, he was welcoming them. And that's not how it was supposed to work. That's what this lawyer's question is getting at. He's asking, "Rabbi, is the *torah* and faithfulness to it not the marker of who is in and who is out?"

¹ *Pirke Aboth* 2.8

And even though the lawyer didn't even mention the law, Jesus knows that this is what the question is really about, so he asks a question in return, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?" And the lawyer responds with those familiar words that we recite every Sunday after the *kyrie*: "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." He gives a summary of the law drawn from Deuteronomy 6:5—"Love the Lord your God"—and Leviticus 19:18—"love your neighbour". The whole law can be distilled down to these two basic points. And it's worth noting that love of God precedes love of neighbour, because at the end of the day, to love one's neighbour depends on and is an outgrowth of love for God. There's nothing controversial here and I don't think the lawyer expected Jesus to argue with him on this point. It just wasn't where he was expecting Jesus to go in response to his question. Jesus himself taught the same thing. Love for God is the key defining characteristic of the people of God. And love for God was to manifest itself in Israel in things like loving one's neighbour and in being obedient to the Lord's commandments. But, you see, where the lawyer and people like him were getting frustrated with Jesus was that he was welcoming people who *didn't* keep the Lord's commandments. It kind of looked like Jesus was looking to some other marker to define the people of God—and if that was true, well, then Jesus was the unfaithful one. But for now Jesus has side-stepped that issue. The lawyer asked what it is that will mark out the faithful in Israel who will inherit the Lord's promised age to come and Jesus asked him what the *torah* says. The lawyer has responded correctly, and now Jesus tells him: "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."

Well, now the lawyer is getting frustrated and probably annoyed. He and Jesus agree that faithfulness to the law is what marks out the people of God. But the lawyer still doesn't have an explanation or justification from

Jesus as to why he *seems* to have such disregard for the law. And so he asks, "But who is my neighbour?" And this is where the problem arises. The answer might seem obvious to us, but at the time it was debated. Leviticus 19:17-18 equates one's brother and a "son of your own people" with one's neighbour. Pharisees tended to see only other Pharisees as their neighbours. One rabbinical saying ruled that "heretics, informers, and renegades should be pushed (into the ditch) and not pulled out".² Tax collectors and sinners, well, most people wouldn't consider them neighbours and there was no question about where gentiles stood.

In response Jesus tells the story we know so well. A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. That 27 kilometres of road was notoriously dangerous. The Roman army had to deal with robbers who entrenched themselves along it. A thousand years later the Crusaders had to build a fort mid-way along it to protect pilgrims. And somewhere along the road this man is waylaid by robbers, beaten, and left for dead. Everyone listening to Jesus would have assumed the man was Jewish, but being unconscious and having been stripped of any clothing that might have marked him out as a Jew, no one passing along the road would have a way of knowing that.

Now, along comes a priest. Priests, Levites, and a certain class of Jewish laymen travelled to Jerusalem to serve two-week stints in service at the temple. This man is presumably on his way home. Priests were at the top of society and so he was probably on horseback. It might seem obvious to us that a priest should be the most likely person to stop and help. He could easily carry the man on his horse to a place where he could get help. But Jesus says that the priest passed by on the other side of the road, making as wide a berth as possible.

We think, "What a horrible priest!" But a lot of people listening—probably including the lawyer—would have applauded the priest for his actions.

After all, a priest had to be ritually pure. Coming near a dead body would render the priest unclean, but so too did contact with a gentile. Without getting close enough to risk defilement the priest couldn't tell if the man was dead and, with the man being naked, the priest couldn't even tell if he was a Jew or not. Defilement meant buying a red heifer, burning it to ash, and returning to the temple to stand in shame with the unclean.

The Pharisees stood in the same tradition of Jesus ben Sira, who wrote:

Do good to a godly man, and you will be repaid...Give to the godly man, but do not help the sinner. Do good to the humble, but do not give to the ungodly...For the Most High also hates sinners and will inflict punishment on the ungodly. Give to the good man, but do not help the sinner. (Sirach 12:2, 4, 6-7)

So, you see, many people in that day would have applauded the priest for avoiding the man. First, some people weren't your neighbour. Some people shouldn't be helped. In fact, to help them was thought to be thwarting God. But, second, for the priest keeping his ritual purity was the highest priority. He had to have that to serve both the Lord and the people, and since he couldn't know who this man was or his condition, well, it was sad he had to pass by, but it was the right—even the godly—thing to do.

Not long after a Levite makes his way along the road. He passes by as well, although the text seems to indicate that he got close enough to investigate, while not getting close enough to defile himself. The Levite was probably on his way home after temple service, too. Defilement was a problem for him as it would have been for the priest, but not nearly as drastic or potentially humiliating, but still, the big question: Is this man my neighbour? The Levite couldn't tell, wasn't willing to risk defilement, and so he passed by. And few people would have thought less of him for doing so.

² Joachim Jeremias *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Scribners, 1972), 202.

Now, it appears that Jesus is telling the story according to a common formula. If I tell a story that involves a priest and a minister walking into a bar, before I say it, you know that they'll be followed by a rabbi. That's the formula. And the common formula in Jewish storytelling involved first a priest, then a levite, and then one of the Jewish laymen who served in the temple. And so the people would be thinking, "The layman can help the man. He can risk defilement." Remember, there actually was no source of defilement here. The man isn't actually dead and is presumably a Jew. It's just that no one could tell this without taking the risk. But a layman could do that. Hope isn't lost for this poor man. But then Jesus breaks the formula. The third man to come down the road is a Samaritan. If there was *anyone* whom a Jew would *know* for absolute certain was *not* his neighbour, it was a Samaritan. They were worse than gentiles. They were their cousins who had remained in the land during the Babylonian exile. They'd intermarried with gentiles and they'd corrupted the faith and the scriptures. They even had their own rival temple. They were compromisers and heretics of the worst kind and the Samaritans and the Jews absolutely hated each other. Again, to quote Jesus ben Sira: "There are two nations that my soul detests, the third is not a nation at all: the inhabitants of Mount Seir, the Philistines, and the stupid people living at Shechem" (Sirach 50:25-26 NJB). Those stupid people at Shechem, those are the Samaritans.

Now, the Samaritan had the same concerns about defilement from a dead body. And Samaritans were no more likely to consider a Jew to be his neighbour than a Jew was to consider a Samaritan to be his. And yet this man stops to help the man. He had compassion, Jesus says. And that compassion put everything else: the law, defilement, race hatred, fear of robbers—it put everything else in perspective. He treated them man's wounds with wine and oil and bound them up, then he put the man on his own animal and took him to an inn. He risked the return of the robbers. He

risked the Jews of Jericho or whatever town he took the man to. If anyone figured out the man on his horse was Jewish, they would have come after the Samaritan. As if enough hadn't happened already to this man, contact with the Samaritan would have left him defiled—nevermind that without the Samaritan he would have died up on the road. And the Samaritan risked being ripped off by the innkeeper—which was apparently a very common thing. But without the innkeeper having been paid, the dying man would have been stuck with no way to pay and likely sold into slavery as a debtor. And in conclusion Jesus asks the lawyer, "Who was this man's neighbour?"

Now, if there was nothing more to this episode than just the parable, the lawyer probably would have told Jesus he was crazy or otherwise condemned him. Jesus was speaking blasphemy. But we can almost hear the lawyer's quiet humility in his response. The parable at least gives him pause for reflection if it doesn't move him to actual repentance. And it does that, because in telling the story Jesus draws on Israel's scripture and the lawyer—and most of the audience that day—knew their Bibles well enough to catch the references Jesus made.

The imagery of Jesus' story is drawn from Hosea 6. Hosea spoke words of warning spoken to the kings and people of Israel—otherwise known as Samaria—and of Judah. Samaria had been unfaithful to the Lord and imminent judgement was coming if something didn't change. And in the longer range, what was about to happen to the northern kingdom would happen to Judah, too. Hosea writes:

**“Come, let us return to the LORD;
for he has torn us, that he
may heal us;
he has struck us down, and he
will bind us up.
After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise
us up,
that we may live before him.
Let us know; let us press on to know
the LORD;**

**his going out is sure as the
dawn;
he will come to us as the showers,
as the spring rains that water
the earth.”
What shall I do with you, O
Ephraim? (That's the northern
kingdom)
What shall I do with you, O
Judah? (That's the southern)
Your love is like a morning cloud,
like the dew that goes early
away.
Therefore I have hewn them by the
prophets;
I have slain them by the
words of my mouth,
and my judgment goes forth
as the light.
For I desire steadfast love and not
sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather
than burnt offerings.
But like Adam they transgressed the
covenant;
there they dealt faithlessly
with me.
Gilead (a prominent city in Samaria) is
a city of evildoers,
tracked with blood.
As robbers lie in wait for a man,
so the priests band together;
they murder on the way to Shechem
(the place of Samaria's rival and
unsanctioned temple);
they commit villainy.
In the house of Israel I have seen a
horrible thing;
Ephraim's whoredom is
there; Israel is defiled.**

Jesus shifts the story of the northern kingdom's judgement and destruction into the present day and applies it to the imminent judgement awaiting Jerusalem. As in verse 4, the people love the Lord, but their love is like a morning cloud, like the morning dew that evaporates so quickly. They offer their sacrifices. Like the priest and the levite in the story, they are committed to God's law, but they've missed the point. They know that they are to love the Lord and to love their neighbours, but then they put all sorts of qualifications on who their neighbours are. They've forgotten that the law was never an end in itself. The reason the Lord had

delivered Israel and made her his people was so that they in turn could reveal him to the nations. They'd forgotten that. In verse 6 the Lord reminds them that steadfast love, that mercy is more important than sacrifice and burnt offerings.

And in verse 9 the Lord exposes the blood on the hands of Gilead, one of the chief cities of the kingdom. And he condemns the priests, who lie in wait like robbers on the road to Shechem—the city where the northern kingdom's rival temple was. Jesus simply shifts the location to the road to Jerusalem. Judgement is coming. That's the point of the parable and people like the lawyer need to amend their ways lest they find themselves destroyed as Samaria was.

But I think Jesus, too, drawing on the same passage from Hosea gives hope and points to his own ministry. The Lord has torn down, but the Lord will restore. He will raise his people to live in his presence. As the Samaritan did for the injured man, the Lord will bind up the wounds of his people. It's hard to miss the reference to rising on the third day. But, too, the fact that the rescuer in Jesus' parable is a Samaritan, points to his own ministry and the failure—even the refusal—of so many to receive him. Rescue, deliverance, life is coming, but it's coming in an unexpected way. The Lord has come to bind up his people's wounds, but to receive that mercy, they will need to set aside their prejudices and their wrong expectations. But Jesus' key point here is that men and women like the lawyer need to rethink what it means to be God's people. First it was the scribes and Pharisees rebuking Jesus for eating with sinners and Jesus had to remind them that heaven rejoices to see the lost restored, to see the sick healed. And now we see the sick of Israel dying on the roadside while those who are well—or so they think—pass by on the other side—and they justify it by thinking that they're being faithful to the Lord. They've misunderstood what it means to be the people of God and if they don't figure this out, if they don't get it right, well, judgement is coming and they'll be on the wrong side of it. The age to

come will arrive, but they will find themselves left out, wailing and gnashing their teeth.

Now, what does this mean for you and I? Jesus' eschatological horizon is long past. The judgement on Jerusalem came and went. And yet here we are, the covenant people of God, because in renewing the covenant and the covenant people, in rebuilding the covenant around himself, in fulfilling God's purpose for Israel as his means of revelation to the nations, we gentiles have been welcomed in. We who are Lo-ammi—like Hosea's son with the prophetic name of judgement—we who were not the Lord's people, because of his compassion, have been made his people through the cross of Jesus. For us the parable has been reversed. We were the Samaritan dying on the roadside and Jesus, the one who took on himself the identity and mission of Israel, the Jew of Jews, has had compassion on us, has come near, and not with wine and oil, but with his own blood, has bound up and treated our wounds and has taken us not to an inn, but into his own household. He has made us part of his family.

The first gentile believers—fulfilling the Lord's promise to Abraham—were drawn to Jesus in faith, because in him they saw the faithfulness of the God of Israel. And now you and I have known that faithfulness as he has welcomed us into his covenant family, a people now defined not by the law written on stone, but by the gift of God's own Spirit who writes his law of love on our hearts. Jesus has resolved the heart problem that has plagued humanity since the fall and that plagues his people in the old covenant. Our love for God—and flowing from that our love for our neighbour—is not rooted solely in what God has done for us, but flows from his Spirit who dwells within us and who renews the desires of our fallen, sinful, and selfish hearts.

You might think the problem manifest in the parable of the Good Samaritan has been done away with forever, but as we all know so well, we continue to struggle. The people of God are still

prone to losing perspective. Another day of judgement is coming and the Church of Jesus has a mission to accomplish—a mission to make him known to the nations. And we know better than to narrow our definition of neighbour as the Jews did. And yet, Brothers and Sisters, how often do we lose our perspective? How often do we pass by the dying on the side of the road, when the duty of love tells us to stop and help, whether with physical acts of mercy or the proclamation of the good news about Jesus? How often do we meet sinners, people in desperate need of the life in which Jesus has given us a share, and instead of sharing with them the redeeming message of the cross, we self-righteously heap condemnation on those who are already condemned? Friends, we have known the grace of God made known in the forgiveness of our sins by Jesus. We have known the grace of God made known in the gift of the Spirit. We have known the grace of God that has made us inheritors of the life of the age to come. If we truly understand that grace, we cannot help but be channels of it ourselves.

Let us pray: Almighty and merciful God, by grace you have forgiven our sins and made us your own. May we who know your grace be faithful in cultivating the life you have given, that your grace may spring up in us, overflowing into the world in our lives, in our deeds, in our prayers, in our proclamation, that all the world might know your grace as we have. Through Jesus our Lord we pray. *Amen.*