

A Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity, September 6, 2009

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“And who is my neighbor?” (from the gospel, Luke 10:23f.)

Today’s epistle (Galatians 3:16f.) continues the theme of last week’s epistle. The Law of Moses, we have been told, was not intended to save us or make us righteous. Rather, it reveals our sin, brings upon us the sentence of death and leads us to Jesus, who saves us. As our epistle says, “The law has concluded all under sin, that the promise by [the] faith of Jesus Christ might be given to all that believe.”

Our gospel (Luke 10:23f.) illustrates this discussion for us. The lawyer in the gospel highlights the issue with the question, “What shall I *do* to inherit eternal life?” We are told that it was a trick question. The lawyer asked it to “tempt,” or test him. Perhaps Jesus would say that some disputed thing was necessary, leaving the lawyer an opening to argue that Jesus was wrong on that point.

When Jesus asked the lawyer what the Law of Moses said he should do, the lawyer recited what we call the Summary of the Law. We should love God with all our heart and soul and mind and we should love our neighbors as ourselves. This is interesting because we expect Jesus to highlight the deeper meaning of the law, not his adversaries. This shows that in the first century these verses (a combination of Leviticus 19:8 and Deuteronomy 6:5) were commonly understood to be the essence of the law. Jesus wasn’t the first to teach that love fulfills the law. Even the lawyer knew this.

But the lawyer also understood that the command to love presents a further challenge; it has deeper implications than any particular behavioral prohibition. While the lawyer may have felt self-satisfied about his religious performance—his love for God—he knew there were questions about his love for neighbor. He knew there were people he didn’t love.

The easiest way to resolve the conflict was to narrow the definition of a neighbor. If we can make the world consist of neighbors and enemies, it is a small thing to move hated people into the latter category and, so, justify our hatred of them.

If we are honest readers of the Bible, we will acknowledge that the Bible does provide some justification for such an outlook. The Psalmist is continually fulminating against his enemies, and praying that God will overthrow them. Hence, if we can move those we dislike into the enemies category, we can feel quite righteous as we pray Psalm 143:12 against them: “Of thy goodness slay mine enemies, and destroy all them that vex my soul, for I am thy servant.”

It was likely this kind of distinction that the lawyer had in mind when he asked, “And who is my neighbor?” Perhaps, he thought, Jesus would say that the category of neighbor consisted of all who observed the Torah. This would allow the lawyer to love all those who shared his belief in God and hate all those who did not, since they did not count as neighbors.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan challenges the lawyer’s categories. Jesus asked, “Who was neighbor to the injured man?” When the lawyer said, “I suppose the Samaritan was,” he was saying that the

Samaritan was a person he would be required to love, now that he was a neighbor—and the Samaritan was someone firmly ensconced in the lawyer’s enemy category.

Now, we might at this point conclude that Jesus is teaching us to love those whom we naturally hate. This is a secondary point of the parable. The question was, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” In response, Jesus gave the lawyer something he could not do. The lawyer could not love a despised Samaritan. That is, he could not “do” what must be done to inherit eternal life.

Thus, the subtle but main point of the parable is that we cannot do what must be done to inherit eternal life. If we are honest, we will have to admit that we have not always loved God with all our heart and soul and mind, and we have not always loved our neighbor as ourselves. There are people we have excluded from the category of neighbor. We have not followed the essence of the law.

And even if we give it our very best effort, we will still fall short of doing what we ought to do. That is the point of the moral law. As the epistle says, “The law has concluded all under sin, that the promise by [the] faith of Jesus Christ might be given to all that believe.” We are sinners who are saved by the grace of God and not by what we do.

The only one who has perfectly fulfilled the essence of the moral law is Jesus. He became man to do for all humanity what humanity is unable to do, and then to offer forgiveness and reconciliation with God to all who put their faith in him.

This truth is, of course, no excuse to avoid loving not only our neighbors but also our enemies. The point is that perfect love is not our natural disposition. It is something we learn “in Christ” through the gift of the Spirit. Once we understand our guilty verdict and the grace of God that answers it, once we stop trying to justify ourselves, we can begin, by God’s grace, to learn to love. The Summary of the Law is both the standard of behavior that reveals our sin and also the behavioral goal of our faith.

The key is the experience of grace. As St. Paul proclaims “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” This is one of the simple, but profound points of the liturgy. We come each week to hear the Summary of the Law and, as sinners, to respond by asking God for mercy and forgiveness. And each week Jesus is still here to give us what we ask for. We fall short in manifold ways, but this does not scare him off. We are still sinners, yet Christ still died for us.

In the first instance, we are the wounded man lying half dead by the road side, and Jesus is the Good Samaritan, the one who loves those who hate him, the one who comes to bind our wounds and make provision for us. He has given us all the grace we need to live until he comes. If we understand this grace just a little bit, we can’t help but be changed by it. We can’t help but begin to reach out to others, whoever they may be, when we see them spiritually and physically wounded by the road.

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