

Sermon on Luke 10:25-37, *And Who is My Neighbor?*
7th Sunday after Pentecost, July 11, 2010
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ....

I learned long ago that learning involves asking questions. We may “learn by doing”, and we often learn by “trial and error” (the old “scientific method”). If we really want to learn, we are trying to understand how things work, or why people act or react in different ways). So it is with faith. Faith is not only simple trust in God. A wise theologian once said that “*faith seeks understanding.*” We are here in worship listening to God’s Word in scripture because we are seeking to understand the ways of God. And to do this, we need to ask questions about the text, and at some point (when we’re really stuck), ask God questions in prayer to seek meaning and understanding of our faith. So asking questions has always been fundamental to faith and theology.

The Bible leads us to answer questions like “*Who is God?*” “*How was the world made?*” “*Who am I in relation to God and the world?*” “*How are we to live?*” “*What are the rules by which God orders the world?*” “*Why is there evil in the world?*” And so on....In Martin Luther’s day a central question he asked was “How can I find a gracious God? How can I be found worthy of God’s love?” – the answer: we are saved by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. In the 20th century, in the midst of two world wars, many asked “Does life have meaning? How can God allow such evil in the world? Does God even exist?” We’ve been working on those for a long time. But now it seems, in a global, multicultural context, with new ways of communicating across the world, we seem to have come around to asking an old, old question again: *Who is my neighbor?*

Which is exactly the question that the lawyer asked Jesus in the gospel today. It was a conversation in which the lawyer seemed to be seeking to understand what Jesus was teaching. It also may be, as Luke says, that the lawyer was seeking to “test” Jesus, as if they were in a court of law. He began by asking “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answered him with a question: “What does it say in the Law – in the scriptures?” The lawyer answered what every Jewish scholar knew by heart, “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.” (This was straight from the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus.) Jesus said, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” So far, so good.

But the lawyer wanted to dig deeper, challenge Jesus more, to clarify. So he asked Jesus, “*And who is my neighbor?*” But instead of answering him directly

with a list of characteristics and qualifications for a “neighbor”, Jesus told him a parable. It’s the story we all know as “the Good Samaritan” – which most of the world knows. It’s about a man who traveled by a dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho, and was assaulted by a gang of robbers, who beat him and left him for dead. It happened that a priest came along, saw the beaten man lying there, but passed by on the other side. Also a Levite (a religious teacher) came along, saw the man as well, but he also passed him by. Nobody stopped. Were they too busy? Were they afraid? We don’t know. But then along came a *Samaritan*, who everybody knew was a *foreigner*, a person no one in Galilee or Judea would have anything to do with. For they had inter-married with non-Israelites and worshipped God with their own traditions and had their own Temple. Most people around Jesus despised Samaritans as being degenerate people because of this.

But Jesus said, it was a Samaritan who noticed the man lying on the road, and was moved by compassion to stop and care for his wounds. Not only that, he brought the victim into town, left him in the care of an innkeeper and paid for his care in advance, with his own money. So when Jesus asked his own question: “Which of these three, the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” the obvious answer was “the one who showed him mercy.” (He couldn’t even make himself say the word, the “Samaritan”!) Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” Go and act like the Samaritan, whom you despise, but who knew how to show mercy. It would be like an illegal immigrant showing compassion for someone who is mugged in Arizona, and caring for their wounds. It challenges our usual stereotypes.

I propose today that you and I are more likely to think like the lawyer in the story. We tend to think about the “limits” to who we should consider our neighbors. We know God says that “you shall love your neighbor as yourself”, but we would prefer that these be “good neighbors”, as much like ourselves as possible! But by this we have it all wrong, and misunderstand God’s intent. God wants us to love our neighbors even when they are most unlike us, and especially when they are most different from us. Like the Samaritan. Or the undocumented immigrant from Mexico or Central America. Or the refugee from Iraq or Somalia. You know, it’s easy to love your neighbor if that person looks and thinks very much like you and me. What’s hard about that? What’s difficult is when your neighbor doesn’t look or think anything at all like you or me, and we still have to be neighbors, and love them as we love ourselves. Which is quite a lot, if we are honest.

But Jesus shows that God’s commandment to love your neighbor is not really about the neighbor, and what they are like, and whether they deserve to be treated with love (which is how *we* think). Jesus turns our assumptions about our neighbors on its head, by saying it’s about *how you and I act as neighbor to others*

that is at the heart of the matter. This is a parable about you and me, how we feel about and act towards others who are different. It's about us and our capacity for compassion, love, or mercy – not about whether others are worthy to be our neighbors!

So instead of asking “who is my neighbor?” Jesus says the question is “how can I be a neighbor to others?” How can I learn to care about the sufferings of others, and learn how to show mercy to them...and thus become a true neighbor myself? These are the questions we should be asking, according to Jesus.

So here's a question many people perhaps are asking: “How should I live in this world, when so many people who are different than me and I don't know how to act toward them?” We could reject them out of hand and tell them to go back where they came from. We could seal up our borders, arrest and deport all those who “don't belong.” It has been suggested, and some laws are on the books – not only in Arizona, but in Minnesota! But Jesus has a better way. Look at the example of the Samaritan, who did what a priest and a layman could not – see the suffering of another with compassion, and showed him mercy...He did the unexpected...in fact, just think how everyone in the parable acted is a surprise to us (except for maybe the victim and the gang of thieves). Nobody did what we thought they would do – not the priest, not the Levite, and certainly not that “no-good Samaritan!” Well, surprise, surprise!

So, friends, our opportunity for learning today is when we ask the question as Jesus asked it, and open ourselves to the surprise of the gospel. Not “who is my neighbor”, but “how can I be a neighbor to others?” When do we see people acting as neighbors, and how can we do the same thing ourselves...when do we see boundaries of ethnic, cultural, and religious hatred crossed and overcome, and mercy shown when we least expect it? When do we see old habits die and old prejudices overcome, with a new way of acting as neighbors to each other?

In the end, the lawyer in the gospel had to admit that it was a Samaritan who acted as neighbor, by showing mercy to someone he didn't even know – who probably didn't even know him! Jesus said, Go and do likewise.....So, how about you and me? What should WE do and say about all this? If you want to learn how to follow Jesus, “go and do likewise” yourself. Imitate a Samaritan. Amen.