

“On Being a Neighbour”

“Which of the three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

“*Is this going to be on the test?*”

That question was undoubtedly asked in classrooms across the country this past month as students prepared for their final exams. It’s a question that probably annoys teachers to no end, since behind such a question is a desire to know how much – or how little – a student needs to study. It’s another way of asking “what is the least amount of studying I need to do in order to pass the exam?”

“*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*”

The question asked of Jesus in today’s Gospel lesson is very similar to students preparing for exams; behind the question is a desire to know what is the bare minimum of obedience to the law that is necessary for a person to receive the gift of eternal life. The person who asks this question is identified as a “lawyer,” an expert in the Torah. Even though he addresses Jesus as “Teacher,” his intentions are not to learn about the biblical teachings on eternal life; Luke tells us that he approaches Jesus in order *“to test Jesus.”* Such “testing” (the word can also be translated “tempting,” as Satan did to Jesus in the wilderness) signals a challenge to one’s honour that is posed by a question. He is publicly putting Jesus on the spot to see how this man from Nazareth might respond, hoping to lure him into a trap that the lawyer might use to call the authenticity of Jesus’ ministry into question.

The lawyer’s question involved what he must do to *“inherit eternal life.”* In the Old Testament, inheritance was the reward promised to those who belonged to the covenant people. God had promised through Abraham to make them a great people, to bless them, and to give them a land (*“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”* – Genesis 12:2). But this promise of inheritance had been continually pushed to the future, until it came to be associated with the blessings of the “Age to Come” (*“... this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.”* – Ephesians 1:14). That inheritance is understood here as “eternal life,” or life in God’s kingdom. The lawyer was testing Jesus to see whether Jesus would give the answer the lawyer expected.

As Jesus was probably well-aware of the lawyer’s intentions, he responds with a question of his own that will challenge the lawyer’s honour: *“What is written in the law? What do you read there?”* Jesus knows that the lawyer would certainly have knowledge of the teachings of the Torah; and indeed, he responds by quoting two passages that Jesus identifies elsewhere in the Gospels as the “Great Commandments”:

- “Hear, O Israel: the LORD is your God, the LORD alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” – Deuteronomy 6:4-5.
- “... you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.” – Leviticus 19:18.

The first commandment about loving God is the *shema*, which every observant Jew knows by heart; it is the prayer the lawyer would have recited twice a day. The second commandment about loving others is a repeated theme throughout the Torah, which makes very clear to the people of Israel that they should care for strangers and aliens among them:

- “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” – Deuteronomy 10:17-19.

As the lawyer has responded correctly, Jesus offers a word of advice: *“You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”* Eternal life is to be found not merely in knowing the commandments but in living according to them; for *“those who live rightly ordered lives now- living out of their love for God, others, and self – show that they have been touched by the kingdom of God.”* (Alan Culpepper).

But Jesus’ response is not what the lawyer desires; his next question is intended as a trap, posing a question that seeks to define the limits of required neighbourliness: *“And who is my neighbour?”* It is at this point that Jesus switches from a direct conversation with his adversary to teaching in a parable that concerns *“a man [who] was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho”*. The central character in Jesus’ story is noticeably undefined; he is not characterized by race, religion, region, or trade. This use of the central character as “a certain man” will become a common feature in Lukan parables (*“There was a man who had two sons.”* – 15:11). Those in the audience would have known that the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous, offering easy hiding places for bandits who terrorized travelers; it would not have surprised them that the man *“fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.”* He was left with nothing to identify his status except his desperate need.

Jesus then introduces a common storytelling device in introducing three travelers who encounter the victim. In such a narrative, the first two characters present negative qualities, while the third is the hero whose actions are to be lauded and emulated. In this parable, the first two characters are prominent members of Jewish society, a priest and a Levite, who might be expected to offer help to the man; but when each comes upon him, they *“passed by on the other side.”* No reason is given for their neglect of the man; many have speculated that neither wanted to risk becoming ritually unclean and therefore being unable to fulfill their duties in the Temple, or that they had pressing business that prevented them from stopping to offer assistance. But in the end, no reason justifies their neglect; *“in both cases, their seeing the man renders them culpable.”* The story takes a turn when a third traveler comes upon the man; unlike the first two, this person *“was moved with pity”* and stops to offer assistance:

- “He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’” – 10:34-35.

It is the third man that is the hero of this story, the one who shows true compassion to the man in need. But Jesus introduces an unexpected twist into this parable: instead of identifying the hero as one of his own people, he is a Samaritan, who the Jews regarded as an unclean people, descendants of the mixed marriages that followed from the Assyrian settlement of the northern kingdom in the eighth century B.C. (*“The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria in place of the people of Israel; they took possession of Samaria, and settled in its cities.”* – 2 Kings 17:24). In Jesus’ day, there was no such thing as a “good Samaritan”: *“Samaritans were the ‘unclean Samaritans,’ the ‘unwelcome Samaritans,’ or the ‘hated Samaritans’... the vast majority would never have thought to view a Samaritan as a ‘neighbour’ whom one must love as oneself.”* (Alan Brehm). By depicting a Samaritan as the hero of the story, Jesus demolishes all boundary expectations. By his care for the beaten man, the Samaritan demonstrates that he is a faithful man.

At the end of the parable, Jesus turns the question back to the lawyer, asking his interrogator, “*which one of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?*” Not able to bring himself to utter the word “Samaritan,” the lawyer replies, “*the one who showed him mercy,*” which provides an accurate description of a neighbour. Neighbours are defined actively, not passively: “*To have a good neighbour you must be one.*” (Arab proverb).

Jesus ends his encounter with the lawyer with a simple commandment: “*Go and do likewise.*” It must be noted that no promise is attached to this command; Jesus does not state that if the lawyer emulates the Samaritan he will receive eternal life. As there is no indication that the Samaritan received any recognition or reward for caring for the man in need, the duty of neighbourliness is an expression of one’s love for God and love for others; the duty of neighbourliness transcends any calculation of reward.

- “Jesus’ parable, therefore, shatters the stereotypes of social boundaries and class division and renders void any system of religious *quid pro quo*. Neighbours do not recognize social class. Neither is mercy the conduct of a calculating heart, nor eternal life the reward for doing prescribed duties. Eternal life – the life of the age to come – is that quality of life characterized by showing mercy for those in need, regardless of their race, religion, or region – and with no thought of reward. Mercy sees only need and responds with compassion.” – Culpepper.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is so well-known that its impact on Jesus’ original audience is often lost on us. We use the phrase “Good Samaritan” to speak of anyone who comes to the aid of a person in need; there is a “Good Sam Club” whose members pledge to stop and help someone who is broken down on the side of the road, and Good Samaritan laws grant immunity to persons who might make an error while rendering assistance. But in Jesus’ day, identifying the hero of the story as a Samaritan would be the equivalent of making him a Palestinian to an Israeli audience, or a Pakistani to an Indian audience, or an Irish Protestant to an Irish Catholic audience. But Jesus doesn’t only identify him as a hated outsider merely for shock value; it is in keeping with the teaching of the Torah which greatly expand the Lord’s definition of a neighbour far beyond human boundaries:

- “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.” – Leviticus 19:33-34.

The key to this command lies in its final words: “*I am the LORD your God.*” God has created all people, and is not restricted by human boundaries and classifications that separate people from one another. While we may look upon others based on what side of the “fence” they reside, or by their national origin or religious beliefs, in God’s eyes all people are “*precious in his sight*”; for as we teach our children, “*Jesus loves the little children, ALL the little children of the world.*” As Paul teaches us, “*there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*” (Galatians 3:28). As Jesus Christ has “*broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us ... that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace*” (Ephesians 2:14-15), our call as Christians is to look upon others not by means of human definition (Jewish or Samaritan, Protestant or Catholic, Canadian or American) but how we are defined in God’s eyes: as children of God who are “*one in the Spirit ... one in the Lord.*”

- “The real tragedy of such narrow provincialism is that we see people as entities or merely as things. Too seldom do we see people in their true *humanness*. A spiritual myopia limits our vision to external accidents. We see men as Jews or Gentiles, Catholics or Protestants, Chinese or American, Negroes or whites. We fail to see them as fellow human beings made from the same stuff as we, molded in the same divine image.” – Martin Luther King, Jr., “On Being a Good Neighbour”

As the Parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us that there are no boundaries for who we consider our neighbour, it also teaches us that must also be no boundaries on the care we offer to any person in need. “The church of Christ, in every age” is called to “*care for all, without reserve, and spread God’s liberating word.*” (ELW Hymn 729). In our affirmation of baptism, we are called “*to serve all people, following the example of Jesus,*” responding without reserve in gratitude to our God who has blessed us and all people without reserve:

- “I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties ... And all this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.”
– Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*.

In following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, who reached out to all people regardless of what side of the border they resided (such as the Samaritan woman at the well in John or the Syrophoenician woman in Mark), we are also called to care for all persons in need no matter who there are, what language they speak, what religion they observe, or how others may view their status. As Christ placed no limits or boundaries on his loving deeds, neither can the church that bears his name place any boundaries on God’s boundless love.

- “The best reason to be good is to want to be good. Internal change requires relationship, it requires love ... A person who truly loves God will be inclined to please God, which is why Jesus and Paul both summed up the entire law in the simple command, ‘Love God.’” – Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*

Yet in spite of the familiarity of the Good Samaritan, we may still find ourselves resembling those students who ask their teacher what will be on an upcoming exam, which is of course an attempt to find out what they *don’t* have to study. Too often, Christians have a tendency to act like the Priest or the Levite, passing on the other side, justifying our lack of compassion for someone in need with a litany of excuses and justifications. Too often, we define church membership by the least that we can do to be considered “active members” of a congregation; our Constitution and Bylaws state that a person need only “*for a period of one year partake of Holy Communion, support the church with offerings and participate in the life and worship of the congregation*” (Article IV, Section 5). But true discipleship never asks “what is the least I can do?” Instead, one who truly seeks to follow Jesus knows that “*love so amazing, so divine demands my soul, my life, my all.*” (ELW Hymn 803). Like the Good Samaritan, we give our all for others because Christ gave his all for us.

- “‘Who is my neighbour?’ is the parting shot of despair (or else of self-confidence); the lawyer is trying to justify his disobedience. The answer is: ‘You are the neighbour. Go along and try to be obedient by loving others.’ Neighbourliness is not a quality in other people, it is simply their claim on ourselves. Every moment and every situation challenges us to action and to obedience. We have literally no time to sit down and ask ourselves whether so-and-so is our neighbour not. We must get into action and obey – we must behave like a neighbour to him You can only learn what obedience is by obeying. It is no use asking questions; for it is only through obedience that you come to learn the truth.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ does not mean we ask our Lord “who is my neighbour?” or “what is the minimal requirement for being a good neighbour?” Discipleship means hearing the word of God and obeying what God expects of us; neighbourliness means we care for all persons without reserve because they too are God’s children; no matter the situation or the circumstance, others will know we are Christians by our love. That’s what it means to be a good neighbour. Amen.