

“Doing Love”

Luke 10: 25 – 37

Makemie Presbyterian Church

September 27, 2009

²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

²⁶He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

²⁷He answered, “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.”

²⁸And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

³⁰Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He 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. ³⁵The 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.’ ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

³⁷He said, “The one who showed him mercy.”

Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

This ends the reading.

Early & young, I became a reader. From waiting on my older brother's Weekly Readers to arrive from Farmington Hills, Michigan to Pickens County in the backwoods of Alabama, I would camp under the mailbox. I devoured them. Then a little older I would choose my books from the school library; always with an eye to an animal story; *Rascal*, *Old Yeller*, *Beautiful Joe*, all the *Black Stallion* series, the *Big Red* books, Jack London beginning with *Call of the Wild* & ending with *Martin Eden*. Then, glories of glories, bumping down the dirt roads came the Book Mobile, sent out by the University of Alabama literacy program. For a child who read as though her life depended on it, the Book Mobile was a gift straight from heaven. In a red leather cover, with a spine that cracked as it was opened, I began a love affair with the British romantic poets; Blake, Wadsworth, Keats, Lord Byron. And if I may, a short Wadsworth quote from the poem, "I wandered lonely as a cloud." It's about when he sees:

A host, of golden daffodils; Along the margin of a bay:

Ten thousand saw I at a glance, Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

I gazed- & gazed- but little thought What wealth the show to me had rought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie In vacant or in pensive mood,

They flash upon that inward eye Which is the bliss of solitude;

And then my heart with pleasure fills, And dances with the daffodils."

I feel the same excitement about the spoken word. The hair stands up on my arms when I hear something said well or say it well myself & of course that makes me love the art of preaching. When I hear someone take the biblical text apart, wake up the tired language & set the trapped images free, then put that same text back together again so that it positively gleams with new meaning, I go outside & do a jig. But lo & behold when I get there – bursting at the seams with new understanding – everything looks the same as it did before.

The most perfect sermon in the world is still an exercise in talking, & hearing, & understanding, but apparently the world could care less unless somehow or another it's translated into action.

Take this sermon, for instance. I have been thinking all week about the parable of the Good Samaritan, reading creative commentaries on it & talking it over with my family. At least one truth I got from it was that God comes to us daily in unexpected encounters with unexpected people, & if we are on the ball, we won't ignore them. Then Wednesday I was driving to Salisbury in the rain, my seat belt on & my doors locked, when I saw a car with its hood up on St. Luke's Road. As I approached, a tall man stepped into the road, holding up a pair of jumper cables & looking me straight in the eye. Several hundred pieces of information went through my mind in

about three seconds. “The man needs help—you are a woman alone in a car—the man needs help—never open your door to a stranger—go to the nearest dealership & send a mechanic – the man needs help—what if he can’t afford a mechanic?—the man needs help—I’m sorry I can’t help—maybe the next person will.” And I drove onto Salisbury, to complete my research on the Good Samaritan.

So that is why I don’t want to talk about him this morning. You already know his story anyway. He’s the guy in the black hat who turns out to be the hero; he’s the heretical outcast who is a better Jew than the Jews. He’s the redneck in overalls with Somerset County plates on his truck who stops for the guy on St Luke’s & not only jumps his car but buys him a new battery as well, leaving a hundred dollars with the mechanic at Pohanka to fix anything else that might be wrong. I don’t understand him. The person I do understand is the lawyer, the character in today’s story who inspired Jesus to tell the story of the Good Samaritan in the first place.

He is above all, a smart person, with a well-trained mind. He’s logical but also imaginative; he can make connections between seemingly unrelated facts & still root out the inconsistencies when other people try to do the same thing. He’s concerned with the law, if not with justice, & with drawing the line between right & wrong. Finally, because he’s following

Jesus around, the lawyer in this morning's story is also a person who is hungry for God, & who wishes to know what the life of faith might require of him.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” he asks Jesus. And who doesn't wonder that? Who doesn't want that? Life with no end, life with no death. For some people, eternal life means heaven, the jackpot at the end of the rainbow, but to hear Jesus talk about it, eternal life also means hitting the jackpot now; eternal life means enjoying a depth & breadth & sweetness of life, that is available right this minute & not only after we have breathed our last. But even if you believe that, how do you get it? What must you do to experience it? That's the question put to Jesus by the lawyer. “Teacher,” he says, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

In good rabbinical fashion, Jesus doesn't answer him. The lawyer wants someone else to hand him the key. He wants the answer to come from outside himself, but Jesus wants him to discover it for himself & so he answers his question with a question. “What is written in the law?” he asks the man. “What do you read there?”

The lawyer answers him beautifully. “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.”

It is one of those answers that make the hair stand up on your arms. It's not only beautiful; its' also right & true & profound, & Jesus tells him so. “You have given the right answer,” Jesus says. “Do this, and you will live.” OR did it sound more like this: “You have given the right answer; do this & you will live”? Sputter. You have gotten the right answer; you have understood; you have said it very, very well. You know what to do, now do it. Sputter.

Why sputter? Because the lawyer thinks about all the people he passes to & from his way to work, all the people sitting on steps & sleeping on sidewalks & drinking in doorways. He thinks about the morning headlines & about the handful of bulk letters that will be waiting for him at the office, letters asking him to send money for abused children, prisoners of conscience, Central American refugees, handicapped veterans, & the victims of a dozen deadly diseases. He thinks about all the people on his books who can't pay him what they owe him, & the crowds in need of free legal advice – all of this on top of his heavy responsibilities at work & at home. The lawyer thinks about all that & his heart goes klunk because

there is no way in the world he can do it all. Do this & you will live? Do this & you will die, of physical, emotional & economic exhaustion.

So the lawyer does what any good lawyer should do. Desiring to justice himself, Luke says, he asks Jesus to define his terms. “And who is my neighbor?” he asks, hoping for a little help, hoping Jesus might limit his liability enough so that he has even a prayer of being able to meet it.

“Who is NOT my neighbor? Whom may I legitimately set outside my concern & still feel good about myself?”

He wants to discuss the issue, explore it with Jesus, expose the problems inherent in it until –with a little luck—it all becomes so complicated that he can go home & pay his bills with a clear conscience.

Have you ever done that? Have you ever stalled for time by making simple things so complicated that you can finally throw up your hands & blame your failure to act on the lousy directions? I have. I have friends with whom I regularly complicate things. We go to lunch & stack up all the evidence we can find that homelessness is really an insoluble problem, having as much to do with addiction, mental illness, illiteracy & the welfare system as it does with low cost housing, so how in the world can we, two lone individuals, even begin to do anything about it? Or we compare our

experience & agree really, if we are honest, there are as many no-account poor people as there are no-account, rich people, so if there is no correlation between goodness & money, why not have money? Giving it away may make you feel better for a while, but the chances that it will really change someone else's life are slim – again, the real problems are social & political—so why not spend it on yourself, where you know it will be put to good use?

Now if you're having a hard time following these arguments, please understand that's the point. These are arguments not to make things clearer, but to make them so muddled that it becomes difficult to move, to act, to do. They're designed to make you feel as if you really understand an issue & that your heart is in the right place, which you can prove by talking about it quite intelligently, & that understanding it is really all that is required of you.

Just this week my husband John & I practiced this technique at home. He had read the special section in the newspaper on the environment & we were discussing the fine points of ozone depletion & the greenhouse effect/ We talked until we understood the issues, but then it got down to what we were going to do about them. Would we start using public transportation? Boycott Styrofoam packaging in any shape or form, even if

it meant going from store to store looking for eggs in cardboard containers? Cut down on our own energy consumption by doing without air conditioning? Our conversation lost momentum from there. John remembered some music he wanted to listen to & I had to get back to my sermon. Everything gets so complicated you see, once you begin to define your terms.

But Jesus will not define his terms. He simply will not cooperate. The lawyer wants to talk about love & about how complicated it is to be open to everyone all the time, how impossible, really, & can't Jesus make the directions a little easier to follow, like defining who IS my neighbor, exactly? But Jesus knows that the last thing on earth the lawyer needs is another discussion & a little more understanding, so he tells him a story instead, the story we just heard Ted read, about how it doesn't matter what we think we understand, know, feel, or say about love, but it is what we DO about love that brings us life.

After Jesus has told the story, he lets the lawyer answer his own question. "Which of these three," Jesus says—the two religious types who crossed to the other side of the road or the heretical outcast who took care of the beaten man—"which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" It's a setup, of course.

There is only one simple answer to Jesus' question & the lawyer again, gives the right one: "The one who showed him mercy."

The one who did something.

"Go & do likewise," Jesus says back to him. "Do this & you will live."

You may have noticed that this isn't really an answer to the question the lawyer asks. The question he asks is, "Who is my neighbor?" But the question Jesus answers is, "Whose neighbor are you?" The answer is: anyone's. Everyone's. Jesus declines to limit the commandment of love & lets the lawyer decide how he will act upon it, but one thing is for sure. What Jesus is calling him to is not a leap of thought, or understanding, or emotion, but a leap of action—of showing mercy, of being a neighbor, of **DOING** love.

Please don't get me wrong. This isn't a sermon about doing more, or feeling guilty. The very next story Luke tells in his gospel is the story of busy, busy Martha & her lazy sister Mary, who Jesus praises for lolling at his feet while Martha does more. This isn't a sermon about doing more. It's instead a sermon about not confusing the knowing, understanding, feeling, thinking, or saying of love with the **DOING** of love. While those are all perfectly fine activities, only one of them leads to eternal life, according to

this story. Only one leads to the fullness of life that makes you believe there is no end to life, or to love, either, & thank God you have enough to go around.

So love God. Love a neighbor. BE a neighbor & let's not complicate things by arguing the specifics. We know what it means to do love because some time or another we have been on the receiving end of it, but remember that knowing the right answers doesn't change a thing. If we want the world to look different next time we go outside, do some love. Do a little or a lot, but do some, & don't forget to get some for yourself. Let the fall showers of God's love soak the seeds of your right answer so that they blossom into right actions & watch the landscape begin to change. Just do love, & find out that when you do, you do live & live abundantly, just like the man said.