

Deuteronomy 30: 9-14

...and the LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, when you obey the LORD your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

Luke 10: 25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He 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.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'*

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' Jesus 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.'

Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 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." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'*

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Life is the Gift of Time Enough

Leave it to the lawyer! He's the troublemaker in today's lesson about the Good Samaritan. Luke starts with these words: "Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus....." Yep, leave it to the lawyer!

A few years ago my family was visiting Chicago, and had to crowd into a taxi with another woman. Something she said identified her as an attorney, and I was just about to call myself her former colleague – a now "recovering" attorney.

But before I could, the cab driver interrupted: "How can you tell when a lawyer is lying? Whenever he moves his lips!" Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" My family got the biggest laugh of all. And somehow, I never did get around to identifying myself as a lawyer....

Leave it to the lawyer! And his question – "How do I inherit eternal life?" ---as if God might just bequeath it to him, if he stays on God's good side – like inheriting part of Grandpa's estate if you don't tick him off. How do I keep in God's good graces, Jesus?

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But to be fair, and perhaps just a tad defensive, at a deeper level the lawyer's question may be one we all wonder about – not just "What is the Roadmap to Heaven," but "How do we live as God wants us to?" How can we be in a right relationship with God and with others? How do we live our lives meaningfully?

Jesus, what *are* the main things on which I need to ground my life so I feel *whole*?

If we had had the chance to sit there, right next to Jesus, and ask him a question, what would it have been? Maybe even a chance to prod him or test him – to see if he was real, or just a fraud not worth trusting. Jesus, what is the most important thing I need to know, asked the lawyer?

It was a good question – probably the one that, in one way or the other, brings us here this morning, too. What's the key thing that will make my life have value?

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Ironically, the lawyer got the answer right, according to Jesus– did you notice? The lawyer gave an answer that came from the Bible, an excellent summation of what the Jewish scriptures taught:

"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."

To live fully, we are to Love God fully – with everything we have – heart, soul, mind, strength. And we're to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Life is a chance to give and receive love.

Jesus is thrilled. Yes! You are right! It *is* the way I've been teaching, says Jesus, **linking these three: love of God, love of self, and love of others.** You cannot have one without the other two; they're all inextricably interwoven.

If you love God, you will love yourself and others, because God loves you and all others. And if you love yourself *and* others, that's how you best show love to God. Love of God, love of self, love of others. Now, Jesus says, go and do these things, follow this simple summary that all my teachings boil down to. And you will live! Life is the chance to give and receive love.

Yay lawyer! A simple, profound question, and a simple, profound answer, one to live by. Sometimes simple is best!

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But. But. Our lawyer friend has trouble sticking to the simple truth. True to stereotype, where we lawyers get our bad reputation, this one tries to complicate things that could be clear. In this case, the lawyer wants to define terms – who is my neighbor, who *exactly* do I need to love? Or, as it was translated at that time, who is my "friend," or "companion" – who's included in the category I need to love?

It was a hotly debated question among the learned teachers. One group of rabbis thought that the Biblical obligation to love a neighbor most likely meant to love one's fellow-countrymen, other Israelites; it did not include foreigners or immigrants who hadn't converted fully to the Israelite way. Love your own. Remember, this was a people who'd been told, time and again, that they should not worship false idols or live among those who did.

Another group of Jews, the Essenes, the probable keepers of the Dead Sea Scrolls, lived in separate communities, like monasteries, in order to be pure. They believed they were required to hate all "sons of darkness." They were to love those who had right beliefs, they thought.

Pharisees had the narrowest view of all – they were to love other Pharisees, ones who believed in God like they did. And not many were talking about loving sworn enemies, the way Jesus did so outlandishly.¹

¹ Jeremias at 159

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We think about limitations, too, don't we? We have to. None of us can be expected to help everyone: we'd exhaust ourselves. We debate how far afield our love should go: to our local cause down the street or to an international mission? To the one next to me in pew or to one suffering in Haiti? We probably should help the "deserving poor," who can't be blamed for their situation, but the ones who've brought their woes on themselves? When are we enabling continued bad behavior? And it doesn't *seem* reasonable to aid and abet enemies.

These questions don't always seem straight-forward. Maybe it is more complicated, like the lawyer said.

And in fact, when we think of these obligations as a set of rules to be met, hoops to be jumped through, then maybe it does make sense to try to narrow them. With our tax laws, we say "I'll pay what I must, but I won't exceed what is due!"

Jesus, who exactly is my neighbor? A lawyer just wanting to clarify, perhaps to limit the love obligation, as we might limit our tax obligation.

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Jesus seems to live by an entirely different world view. He sees life as a chance to give love and receive love. As a gift of time, when we can do this.

Jesus won't be cornered by the question the lawyer wants answered, and instead turns, with love, to what the lawyer most needs to hear. The lawyer asked about the one being *helped* – he wanted to limit who we need to help.

But Jesus turns the whole thing 180 degrees around, and focuses on who the helpER is. Jesus tells us *absolutely nothing* about the man who was hurt, the one we're supposed to help. Not a word. We only hear this: "a man" went out on the road and fell in with robbers.

"A man." that's it. We don't know the person's nationality, his age, his skin color, his religion. He'd been in Jerusalem, but that was a cosmopolitan city – anyone could be there, even foreigners like Samaritans. No, we don't know about the demographic info – the age, rank or serial number – of the one who is hurt and needs help.

We don't even know that the man was an innocent victim. We tend to assume that, but we don't know. Maybe the man was travelling at night in a dangerous place by himself – in which case, what was he thinking? Even to say that this man "fell into the hands of robbers" doesn't assure us of his innocence. Based on my days in a prosecutor's office, this could be a drug deal gone bad, where one "bad guy" robs another hoodlum.

Jesus won't add complexity here –he'll use only two words to describe the person needing help: “a man.” No limiting adjectives at all. The one needing help could be a punk. A creep. A criminal. An illegal immigrant.

Jesus refuses to set limits on *who* our neighbor is. He never qualifies who it is we are called to help. There is no one – no one- beyond the text of this story. It's clear: a person in need is a person to be helped, according to these words of Jesus .

Jesus won't limit who the helpER might be, either – in fact, here Jesus radically expands the definition of helpER expected by the Jews of that day. Even the most unlikely person, the Samaritan, might be the person God will use to help *us*, when we feel beaten up.

It could be someone we consider an enemy whom God will use to be the surprising person who offers us far more help than we can ever imagine might come our way.

Jesus sets no limits at all on the “**who**” questions – either on (1) who is worthy to receive our love, or (2) who might be our helper, the one who shows *us* God's love.

Jesus may well show us different ways of HOW to love: he gave different people different kinds of love -- tough love or gentle mercy --depending on what they needed. HOW we are to love is another whole set of sermons. But Jesus set no limits on WHO to love or be loved by.

Sometimes simple is better. Love God, self and all others. All others.

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My hardest work days haven't been as an attorney. They were at another church I served. There we so many demands – so many in our city who needed help. So may tough, complicated issues to navigate. There was never enough time.

Then one morning during prayer, it came to me – so simple. I could never do everything on my to-do list each day. But I could give and receive love. And that was all God was asking me to do in one day.

Give some love. Receive some love. That I could do. Life is the chance, every day, to give and receive love.

It was like what God says in Deuteronomy – dear children, it isn't that complicated:

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard, too complex, for you, nor is it too far away. It is not unattainable up in in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us...” Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us?”

My word is very near you. It's written on your heart. On your very own heart.

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I am very near you, says this God of love. Receive my love. Give my love. **Because** God first loves us, without any limit at all.

Jesus sees **us** when we are by the side of our life's road, and is moved with pity. No matter who we are, he stops all he is doing, and comes to us, tending our wounds, carrying us to a safe place, promising to provide for all we need in order to be made whole, assuring us he will return.

That's where the cycle begins. By our first realizing how much we are loved by God. By receiving that love each day we have the strength to respond with love: to love God, to love ourselves, and to love our neighbors.

Sometimes simple is better. Give and receive love. Because we can. Even today.

May it be so.