**Sermon for Proper 10-C**

**Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Aiken, South Carolina**

07-13-25

Luke 10:25–37

In this morning’s gospel text, a lawyer stood up to put Jesus to the test; to cross examine him. He was not asking a question of which he did not already know the answer. He was a lawyer; an expert in the law, and an expert in the art of rhetoric.

 He was approaching Jesus as he would approach a person testifying in court, with the goal of using their testimony, their own words, to set them up, in order to refute their testimony, and discredit their case.

 Little did he realize that he was actually setting himself up, for his question was inherently flawed; “What shall *I* *do* to *inherit* eternal life?”

 Nobody does anything to receive an inheritance; it is given to them by someone else. God’s promise to his people has always been the promise of redemption; of giving them eternal life as their inheritance. The faith of God’s people has always been faith in receiving this promised inheritance.

But, the vast majority of the Jews had become caught up in a misunderstanding that remains the foundation of Judaism today, and is common even among Christians; that the law itself is the way of salvation. Given that misunderstanding, they’d become fixated on doing the law.

Such was certainly the case for this lawyer. Jesus, therefore, sends this expert in the law back to the law to find the answer to his question, asking him *“What is written in the Law? How do you read it?”* In other words, how do you understand it?

The lawyer’s answer showed him to be, in fact, an expert in God’s law; for God’s holy law is summed up in this; Love God, and love your neighbor.

 That is mankind’s holy obligation. That is the entire two tables of the law. Do this, and you will live; do this, and you will be a child of God; do this, and you will have eternal life.

 It’s just that easy; until we try to do this, and realize that we cannot. The more effort that we put into trying to do the law, then the more we realize that we actually violate the law. The lawyer knew the letter of the law, but he did not know the spirit of the law, which is love.

The letter of the law is written in our hearts, and it is a harsh taskmaster. To truly do the law requires perfect obedience, from the heart, and the law shows us that we always fail to keep this requirement.

 We only grasp the spirit of the law when our heart is made alive with God’s own love through the Holy Spirit. Living by the letter of the law, our best efforts simply cannot reach the high standard that God’s law demands; perfect obedience, from a willing heart.

Therefore, in order to justify ourselves, we seek to lower the bar. “The law says that I have to love my neighbor as myself.”

 “Okay then, tell me; who is my neighbor; show me who I have to love, so that I don’t waste my time and energy on all those other people.”

“By the way, I can still hate my enemies, right?” “Scripture says love your neighbor and hate your enemies.” “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Who is my neighbor?” Enslaved to the letter of the law, this is how we think.

But, Jesus turns the concept of neighbor upside down with his story of the Good Samaritan. Who will be a neighbor to the victim of the robbers; who will help this beaten, bloodied, naked, half dead man laying there in the road? Not the expected heroes of the story, the priest and Levite, two men whose entire lives are centered around the worship of God and service in his holy temple. Surely, if anyone would keep the law, it is these two men.

 But, the priest and the Levite avoid having anything to do with the man. Their concern is only for themselves and their own physical safety, their personal agendas, and remaining clean, according to the Mosaic law.

 Who does come to the aid of this man? Salvation comes from an unexpected source; a Samaritan; the most despised of all people by the Jews. Samaritans and Jews absolutely hated each other.

 It cannot be overemphasized how shocking and unacceptable this twist in the plot would be to the lawyer. Imagine telling the same story in Israel today replacing “Samaritan” with “Palestinian,” and you get the idea.

There was a man who taught in Palestine for many years, a Mr. K. Bailey, who said that in all of those years, he never had the courage to tell a story to the Palestinians about a noble Israeli, nor a story about the noble Turk to the Armenians. Such was the relation between the Judaeans and the Samaritans of Jesus’ day.

 Who proved to be a neighbor to the one who fell among the robbers? The one who showed him mercy; the noble Samaritan. Moved with compassion, the Samaritan thinks nothing of his own safety, nor cares about who this person is, his ethnicity or background; only that this man desperately needs help. So, he goes out of his way to help him.

 He treats his wounds; he lifts him up; he brings him to a safe place of rest, and he arranges for his continued care until he returns. He didn’t have to do any of these things, but, moved with compassion, he did.

 As for the victim, being half dead, he could only passively receive the care that saved his life.

Having told the story, and the lawyer having conceded that the one who proved to be a neighbor to the victim was the one who showed him mercy, Jesus tells the lawyer *“You go, and do likewise.”*

 What happened after that, we don’t know. Did the lawyer understand from this story that mechanically doing the law, is not the way of salvation; that the law only proves to us our shortcomings?

If so, then, perhaps the Holy Spirit opened his eyes to understand that the story of the robbery victim and the Good Samaritan is actually a story about himself and Jesus. It’s also the story about you and Jesus as well.

Satan left mankind naked and half dead, robbed of eternal life and righteousness before God. We have nothing of ourselves that can save us. But God, seeing our helpless state and moved with compassion, came into his fallen creation to save us.

Even though hated and despised by his own people, he healed our wounds by being wounded for us. By his crucifixion, death and burial, he has given us eternal life as our inheritance.

 Resurrected and ascended back to heaven, he has prepared a place for us with him, and he shelters us in his church until he returns for us.

 The story of the Good Samaritan is the story of salvation; your salvation. You are the helpless victim; Jesus Christ is the Good Samaritan.

What shall we do to inherit eternal life? There is nothing that you can do. Eternal life, salvation, righteousness before God, has already been given to you. All that you can do is to simply receive it by taking God at his word that he’s done it; that it is finished.

Only then do we truly keep the law; we keep it by faith in the One who has perfectly fulfilled the law for us.

Only then do we begin to desire to do those things that are pleasing to God, and to avoid those things that are not.

 The heart bound to the letter of the law asks “Who is my neighbor?” The heart freed by faith in the full forgiveness of sins won for us, and given to us, by Jesus Christ, moves us to simply be a neighbor to those around us.

Then, Jesus Christ brings his mercy to others, through us, according to our relations and our vocations in this life.

 May he then help us to always rest in that eternal life that we already possess, and move us with compassion for the needs of those around us, that we may be those instruments of God’s mercy to them, even as he has had mercy on us. Amen.