

I don't suppose that today was the first time you've ever heard this parable about the “Good Samaritan”. The Internet lists pages of hospitals named, “Good Samaritan”, the “Good Samaritan Society” provides a caring home and health environment for seniors, and “Good Samaritan Laws” protect those who help injured strangers avoid lawsuits later on. The Good Samaritan is a very familiar story, a cultural icon, but as I thought about that Bible passage this week, I don't believe that Jesus was just urging us to help strangers in distress or to care for those who are in need or in trouble. One of the characteristics of Luke, the only Gospel that mentions the Good Samaritan story, is its focus on God's grace toward gentiles and outcasts, and that those rejected as sinners by the religious authorities are in fact welcome, and are beloved and precious to the Lord. That is a major theme that runs all through Luke, for example, in the Magnificat, Mary the mother of Jesus declares

(1:46-48) “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.”

When Jesus is born, it's announced by a heavenly host of angels, not to the high priest or a group of scribes and Pharisees, but to humble shepherds tending their flocks by night. Eight days later when they took baby Jesus to the Temple, the priest Simeon, filled with the Spirit proclaims,

(2:30-32) “... my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles ...”

And so it goes, as Luke tells the story about the ministry and life of Jesus. And because Jesus reaches out to sinners and tax-collectors, heals lepers, condemns religious hypocrisy, cures the blind and lame, even on the Sabbath and shares meals with those deemed unworthy of hope or acceptance, there is a growing sense of tension and conflict between Jesus and the leaders of the religious establishment. His compassion grace and forgiveness rather than condemnation or excluding those who fail or make a mess of their life, was not what was expected from a leader, prophet or rabbi. In this passage today, that tension and conflict continues,

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

Now a scribe in those days was a well-educated biblical scholar and a part of the religious establishment and leadership, and they were very suspicious and increasingly tried to derail and oppose the ministry of Jesus Christ. So this scribe approaches to test and challenge him with a question that will highlight their differences, and to show that his teaching deviates from Scripture. From the perspective of the Jewish religious authorities, what God required of his people was to follow scrupulously and obey the laws, rituals, customs and traditions, that defined what it meant to be ceremonially clean. As they understood the teachings of Scripture, God gave the Law through Moses so that they would stand and live distinctly separate and apart from the gentile and pagan world all around them. They would be God's own favored and chosen people, which also meant the exclusion of all others as unworthy and unholy rejects, as outcasts hopelessly lost and unacceptable to God. The religious authorities and leaders assigned a major focus on identifying, condemning and avoiding any contact with anyone or anything ceremonially unclean, **as the primary concern and requirement of God**. In contrast to that perspective & emphasis on avoiding the unclean, we see that the life and ministry of Jesus was all about touching, connecting and healing the sick, and seeking to restore the lost, sinful and excluded.

The life, teach and ministry of Jesus clearly reveals that he regarded no one as beyond the reach of God's healing compassion... and all as a matter of God's grace, not by our own good works. It is that contrast between Jesus and the religious establishment concerning what it is that God truly requires and desires that led to the conflict of the scribe's “testing”,

vs. 25 “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

That question is loaded with theological content. In the Greek, the scribe's emphasis is on “what must I do” – what is my responsibility as in something I must accomplish, inferring the importance of “doing” as in Law and rituals. But that understanding is incongruous with the word, inherit, since an inheritance comes as a free-gift that you receive as specified by someone's will that is based on your relationship with them. An inheritance comes about from having a relationship, and you don't actually “do” anything to earn a free-gift. Jesus chooses not directly answer this testing and challenge. Instead he turns the question back on the scribe,

## Page 2 of 3

vs. 26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"

The scribe answers Jesus by quoting two Scripture passages, a verse from Deuteronomy and one from Leviticus,

vs. 27 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."

Jesus agrees with the scribe's answer. Yes, love the Lord your God and love your neighbor, heart, soul, strength and mind do all that, you will live... and so far everybody seems to be all in agreement. But there is more going on in this scene. What actually takes precedent with God?, is it our just and kind treatment of others, or is it our own purity before the Lord by avoiding contact with tainting contamination, as in those who don't obey Law and ritual? The conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders really came down to the question of who is in and who is outside the boundaries of God's compassion. The scribes and Pharisees proclaimed a God who rejects sinners and people who fail and fall. While Jesus proclaimed a God, who as a loving Father, races out the welcome home the prodigal son, or the good shepherd who seeks out and carries back the lost and stubborn wandering sheep.

That difference is the basis of the scribe's next question,

vs. 29 "And who is my neighbor?"

So who is my neighbor and who must I love? Who matters to God, and who does not matter to God? Jesus answers that, by telling a story that we have all heard, many times. If we read the parable from the perspective of the scribe, then when the priest and Levite saw the half-dead man lying by the side of the road and quickly passed by on the other side, they were simply trying to stay ceremonially clean by not risking contamination or corruption. They were fulfilling their primary religious obligation according to their religious laws, rituals and traditions, for the beaten man was not necessary their neighbor, or even someone within the bounds of God's concern. When we are confronted with the situation of the parable, it is a compelling lesson that we want to be someone who would go out of their way to help a stranger in need. Even the scribe agreed that the neighbor was the one who showed mercy to the injured traveler. But is that really the whole point that Jesus was making? 18 centuries ago, Augustine suggested a different perspective, and that rather than trying to be like the Good Samaritan, we need to see ourselves as the helpless wounded traveler, see ourselves as the beaten, stripped and dying man lying in helpless and hopeless need & desperation.

Augustine saw the half-dead man who fell into the hands of robbers as a metaphor describing the true condition of every sinner... unable to heal ourselves – we depend entirely on the grace of God. That means that the road from Jerusalem to Jericho describes metaphorically the world in which we all live – a dangerous place where we can be robbed and beaten up, attacked and stripped of our dignity as God's beloved, left alone feeling unworthy, wounded along life's highway, and quite unable to help ourselves or heal our own wounds. Augustine's interpretation of this parable means that the priest and the Levite represent the laws, rules, ritual and traditions of their religion, and that through this parable, Jesus was showing that Law and rituals alone won't save us. Our own efforts and good works can't heal our estrangement from God any more than the dying in the ditch could make himself whole. Also, if the point Jesus was intending to make by this parable was simply that we ought to care for strangers in distress, why not have one of the religious guys help the man, and why was it a Samaritan who did the right thing? The Samaritans were rejected and hated by the religious Jews, initially because they intermarried with gentile invaders, and it was a shocking & unlikely choice for a Samaritan to be the one to save the beaten and dying victim. Jesus pushes this when he asks the scribe,

vs. 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?

The scribe has been trying to justify excluding sinners as outcasts when he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?", or who matters to God, and to whom I must show mercy and love? From the parable, the barriers of exclusion from God's grace & love have been torn down, because all are precious and matter to God. That detail of the merciful traveler being a Samaritan was a foretaste of what Jesus came to accomplish, because he too was rejected & hated by the religious leaders, and came to save the wounded and unworthy sinner-outcasts. The Samaritan of this parable represents Christ, our neighbor, who finds us as sinners, battered, half-dead and broken. He pours the oil of his healing mercy on our wounded souls, to heal our hurts, disappointments, losses and failures. He washes away our dirt and filth with the waters of baptism, and refreshes us with wine & mercy, as a means of God's grace. He brings us to an inn of care, his Church, where our wounds continue to be attended as we are nursed and nurtured by God's word & Spirit. Jesus sees and seeks the wounded and dying sinner, and by grace and mercy brings us to the healing & new life that we are unable to do or accomplish for ourselves... giving us new meaning, hope and purpose in life by

## Page 3 of 3

showing us grace and mercy like no one else ever will. The Church is to be like the inn of compassion of the parable where the broken, fallen and wounded are all welcome and can continue in our healing as was promised,

vs. 35 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'

The question is not how we have sinned and failed in the past, or what we did that left us wounded, bleeding and broken, but what are we going to do here in this time and place, what am I going to do with the grace & blessing of God? The point is, that Jesus came to be the compassionate Samaritan, the true and good neighbor to all sinners in need & desperation by breaking down any barriers that we might construct. It is really quite simple, but also can be very difficult to do.

First allow the Samaritan, let God's love heal and care for you. Then as those who have received the grace and mercy healing of God, we are called and empowered to "Go and do likewise" to allow the mercy and grace of God to flow freely through us out to our wounded, broken and hurting angry world... **for it is in our following Jesus and being bathing in his grace that we can find the power to love as he has first loved us... so now, go and do likewise.**