

## Who is My Neighbor?

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text is from the Gospel reading according to St Luke, chapter ten, verses 27-29, 36-37 – *‘Then turning to the disciples He said privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.” And behold, a lawyer stood up to put Him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And 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 answered correctly; do this, and you will live.” But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ... Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, 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, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”’* This is our text.

In the Name of Jesus, Who is a neighbor to you.

“Who is my neighbor?” That’s the question I briefly wish to address this morning. That was the question of the lawyer who came to test Jesus. In many ways, that seems to be the question many people around the country, and perhaps around the world, are asking, or should I say, **should be** asking, as we soon enter the sixth month of the COVID-19 pandemic. But it’s really not a new question. Who is my neighbor? Who should I be concerned about?

The lawyer was looking to trap Jesus. The lawyer is not what we think of as a lawyer today. Sorry, no lawyer jokes. A lawyer today practices law. He knows it, interrupts it, and advises others. He may argue it in a court. The lawyer of our text is an educated and wise man, wise in the Torah, all the instruction of the Hebrew Bible. He could expound the law, but that didn’t mean he knew what it meant. He didn’t apply the law except to say, “white is white and black is black, and there is no in-between.” He has been listening to Jesus and what he has heard doesn’t exactly match what he quote knows unquote the law, all 613 of them plus the Ten Commandments, says. He knows the letter of the law, but not the spirit.

Jesus doesn’t fall into the trap. As always, He uses this as an opportunity to teach. Since this man is trained in the law, and as we might say, “Knows it backwards and forwards,” Jesus asks him how the law reads **to him**; hidden in this, not how it has been interpreted by others before him. He answers correctly and is commended by Jesus. But now, suddenly, he has a sinking feeling in his gut. The law is **the law**. You either keep it, and keep all of it, or you don’t. And the hard part in that has to do with my neighbor, so he thinks.

He’s looking for this in order to inherit eternal life. He wants to do good. Eternal life in this law-oriented scheme is about earning merit. But, how do we in fact inherit something? We don’t actually do a thing. Somebody else has to die. I inherited a third of the farm I grew up on, but that meant Mom had to die, which meant Dad had to die before that. To inherit eternal life means Christ Jesus had to die for me and for you and for this lawyer. And we have to believe that. And that’s good news because we can’t do it ourselves.

He’s answered Jesus and was commended by Him. He wonders, “Then why do I feel like something is missing?” Luke writes that he wished to justify himself. This neighbor thing might be a problem. So his next question is, “Who is my neighbor?” Perhaps a better question would have been “What is love.” But that’s another day.

I originally had planned on speaking about this justifying thing. I had titled my message, “Oh, to be Justified.” We are constantly justifying what we do. Consider the politicians in this election season. Why were you speeding? We’ve got an answer. “It’s not my fault – my teacher doesn’t like me; I was raised on the wrong side of the tracks; everybody has got it in for me.” Makes me think of the Jets, a group of white boys, in the play *West Side Story*. All of those are attempts to justify our action or inaction. I read a month ago about an elderly man who had just taken \$200,000 out of his savings, in cash. When he got to his car, somebody beat him up, and stole the money. Sounds a bit like our parable today. Somebody caught the entire beating and running away on video. Now, thankfully I have never been in the position of the videographer, but my question to him is “Was it more important to get a video of this than perhaps go to the aid of the elderly gentleman?” How would he justify his inaction?

We can’t justify ourselves before God. We often have a hard time justifying ourselves before our wives or husbands, before our children, our boss, etc. But thankfully, Christ died for your sins of self-justification and atoned for them. God has declared you righteous in the eyes of the only One who counts – Himself.

Who is my neighbor? We’ve got a lot of neighbor issues these days. I don’t have the answer people are looking for, but I do know the answer people, including you and me, need. Repentance and forgiveness; that is, to be justified by God through Christ.

Who is my neighbor? Maybe an equally important question is “what is a neighbor?” The footnote in *The Lutheran Study Bible* says in Greek the word means “nearby, close.” For the Jew, a neighbor was a member of the Hebrew race and community. So were there non-Jews in the lawyer’s neighborhood or city and he was beginning to wonder about how to deal with them? Did he have to love them as the commandments say? Don’t know, but in any case, that was his question.

What are our neighbor issues today? Maybe we don’t have any! Ha! We live by the rule of “North Dakota nice.” Ha! One of the issues of today is slavery. Is slavery a bad thing? The way it was practiced in this country absolutely. But because Jefferson owned slaves, because somebody carved a statue of Lincoln which elevates him above an African-American and a Native American, and countless others, should we despise them? Maybe we need to use dynamite on Mount Rushmore? I read earlier this week that a special commission appointed by the mayor of Washington DC has recommended changing the names of schools, streets, buildings, etc., including the Washington Monument and the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials. Absurd! Consider, when Joyce and I visited the Czech Republic, we learned an interesting thing. For forty-one years, they lived under a communist dictatorship with all the attendant evils. They had lots and lots of statues around the country quote praising unquote the communist leadership. Did the Czech’s take sledgehammers to the statues, or pull them down with tractors? We didn’t see a single one, but they were all still there. The leadership wisely gathered them into a museum. There the faults and failures of the past can be studied, and the people can learn never to allow this to happen again. That’s a neighborly thing to do. Don’t tear them down or rename them as if these sinful, horrible actions never took place, as if these men never lived, as if these men were not sinners just like you or me.

Our nation is divided. The conservatives won’t talk to the liberals. The liberals won’t talk to conservatives or other liberals. How do they hope to get anything done? It is not any different in our beloved church; although, at least we’re not shooting at one another. These are all our neighbors; all people for whom Christ died and rose.

Oh, I suppose I could go on, but you get the point. Who is your neighbor? Is she the person next door, or just down the road? The late winter before I turned four, my one brother and I were in the barn in the morning with Dad as he was bringing the bull back into the barn from the water tank. He was leading him with a pole hooked to a nose ring. The pole had frozen to the ring. As Dad struggled to free the hook, the bull jerked his massive head, knocked Dad down, and then trotted out the barn door into

the yard. Dad's shoulder was dislocated. The neighbors came over to help. That summer, the barn blew down. The neighbors came over to help tear down the wreckage. That's who neighbors are and what they do. They aren't invited, they just do.

I mentioned before that according to Hebrew tradition, a neighbor is somebody who is near. That should have been easy for the lawyer to define. Why did he need Jesus' help? We might suggest that a neighbor is close by; like a mile or two away here in the country. Or a neighbor might be a relative, but again relatively close by. And in these cases, it is distance which defines neighborliness. But Jesus turns all of this on its head. He says it's not about relation or distance, but it about love and opportunity. How much closer could the priest or Levite have gotten to the Jewish man, one of their own, than to pass by on the other side of the road to avoid ceremonial impurity? We don't know the ethnicity of the victim, but he was probably a Jew. If so, for him the Samaritan is an enemy, but that doesn't stop the Samaritan from loving him and helping. Love is blind.

What are we called to do for our neighbor? The neighbor is one who has been brought into contact with us. So we may, notice I said may, not must, help the homeless man on the street corner. We may come to the aid of people who have lost everything in a storm or fire. A question about the homeless man. Who might a neighbor of his be other than his family who has distanced themselves because of some past indiscretion of his? Just wondering.

In less than two months, we have state and national elections. Who do you vote for? I knew this answer, but a political science professor from Texas A&M brought it to mind. Do you vote for the one who may make your life a little bit better; the one who promises to submit legislation, in the case of the governor or president, to ease your taxes? Not necessarily. You vote for the best candidate to help -- your neighbor. I can't legally tell you who to vote for. But who is the neighbor who needs your vote? Is it the pre-born child? Is it the frail octogenarian who is threatened by medical rationing and left to die? Was that part of the COVID-19 response in some areas of the country? Just wondering. Maybe it's about taxes, health care, or highway construction, wheat and dairy prices, whatever. Maybe your vote and love for your neighbor is also a vote for you; that's okay.

We've had a lot of unneighborliness in this country in the last few months, such as peaceful protests which are fine if we know what we're protesting and riots, which no matter what, are criminal, but really it is nothing new. We are self-centered. Adam and Eve's sin was one of pride, but behind that pride was the sin of self-centeredness. I want it for me (*Gen 3:1-6*)! Satan likes us bickering and fighting and not loving. Can we fix this? In time, perhaps. But we have the answer right now. Christ died for all these sinners and has redeemed us. We sing with David, "*(Psa 32:2)* Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit." Love your neighbor as yourself -- he may be closer, or not, than you think. He is the one God has put in your path to love without giving it a thought. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.