

Desiring to Justify Himself

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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Preached on the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time, (11 July), 2010.

Text: Luke 10:29 “But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘*And who is my neighbor?*’”

We are told he was a lawyer. That was a religious professional, not a litigator. He was an expert in the Torah. The story is found only in Luke and is carefully paired by the author with another story, the one we will look at next Sunday, of Mary and Martha and their lunch time encounter with Jesus. Luke wanted us to read the two stories together, the Good Samaritan and Mary and Martha. The stories both concern people trying to understand the meaning of Jesus’ teachings about the Kingdom of God and how one found a relationship with their Creator. In today’s we are told a lawyer asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”¹ It is a similar question to the one asked by the rich young ruler,² and in both cases Jesus replied by turning the questioner to the Torah. “What is written in the law?” he asked. The lawyer knew; after all, it was his specialty. *But knowing scripture is not the same as knowing God.* And we suspect this fellow was disingenuous because Luke says later that this lawyer wanted ‘to justify himself.’³ This is not a compliment. It means he thought he could get right with God all by himself, through his own efforts. He knew about God but did he know God? It seems he tried to look good in his own eyes and in the eyes of others. The lawyer demonstrated his prowess by quoting scripture to Jesus, verse by verse. But he soon learned that in Jesus’ view being made right with God was not a result of theological perspicuity or the result of a person’s own efforts.

Jesus told him one of his most memorable parables. Note in the story that the two people who did not stop to help were also students of the law, one a Levite and the other a priest. This means that both of them had much in common with the man who asked Jesus the question, “Who is my neighbor?” The story implies, assumes, indeed demands that we acknowledge these two passersby were good people. We miss the point if we think these two were bad. They were people concerned with God, morality and the demands of Torah. So was the lawyer to whom Jesus was speaking. Prof. Craddock commented,

While their behavior was certainly not commendable, neither was it without reason. The body on the roadside could have been a plant by robbers to trap a traveler. And certainly contact with a corpse would have defiled the priest and the Levite and disqualified them from their Temple responsibilities. When they saw the victim there was a choice between duty and duty.⁴

‘*A choice between duty and duty*’—there’s something we can all relate to.

¹ Luke 10:25.

² Luke 18:18.

³ Luke 10:29.

⁴ Craddock, Fred B. Luke. (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 151.

It was a Samaritan who stopped to help the poor man beaten and robbed by the side of the road. A Samaritan was looked down upon by those in Jerusalem. The Samaritans had their own Temple⁵ and the Torah and were in many respects much like the Hebrews. Though Samaritans would not have been thought of as ‘good’ by Jewish people, this one clearly was. It is the power of this surprise that carries the point of Jesus’ parable. Not everyone we think is good and not everyone we think of as bad always follows our expectations. “Remember ... this man ... delayed his own journey, expended great energy, risked danger to himself, spent two days’ wages with the assurance of more, and promised to follow up on his activity.”⁶ All this and yet many of Jesus’ listeners—certainly the lawyer who peppered him with questions—would have thought of any Samaritan as ritually unclean, an outcast and a heretic! You just never know.

But given that line about his ‘desiring to justify himself,’ the lawyer to whom Jesus told this story would have also felt to force of Jesus’ point. (It doesn’t pay to try to spar theologically with Jesus.) Jesus was delicate about it but still he skewered the lawyer and his ilk. Being able to quote verses of the Bible does not mean you know God.

What does it mean to know God in the sense of having a relationship with God? In the introduction to this story the question is how to gain eternal life. That is Biblical talk for coming to God and being caught up in the life of God. This is very much the question of knowing and being known by God. To the question the lawyer and Jesus agree that Torah gives two answers:

- 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 you shall love your neighbor as yourself.⁷

Apparently there was no question about how one loved God but the lawyer pushed Jesus about the neighbor corollary. “*Who is my neighbor?*” he asked. He wanted to argue. Does it include, say, Samaritans, or only other Jews? Are women included, those of a different class? Just who is my neighbor? Implicitly there is also a hidden question: Why does taking time to assist a neighbor have anything to do with knowing God, finding eternal life? Why is showing mercy to a neighbor part of loving God? I am not sure Jesus is crystal clear here but reading between the lines and reading his other teachings I think he will say: *Each human being—Jew or Greek, slave or free, man or woman—is created by God in the image of God. In loving another person, we love God in that person. Or, put negatively, if we abuse, mistreat or fail to show mercy to that person, we fail to love God.*⁸

The lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” implies selectivity that some people are neighbors and some are not. There we see the lawyer’s error. After Jesus told him the story of the Samaritan on the road, the teacher reframed the lawyer’s question: “Which of these [three], do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”⁹ The lawyer must have swallowed hard but he replied in what was obvious, “*The one who showed him mercy.*”

⁵ At Mt. Gerazim.

⁶ Craddock, *op cit.*

⁷ Luke 10:27.

⁸ See Genesis 1:26 and Matthew 25:31ff.

⁹ Luke 10:36.

Jesus then said to him and to us, “Go and do likewise.” This is not an easy matter. Even good people, maybe especially good people like the lawyer, the Levite and the priest—for that matter people like us—have trouble sorting out duty from duty. Following Jesus it is not enough to know scripture; nor is it enough to show mercy to those *like us*.

But there is even more to it than this. That is the point of the second story that Luke pairs with this one. We will read and look at that story next Sunday.

End

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