

July 11 2010 – Sermon preached at the Cathedral of St. George the Martyr by Canon John L. Peterson

Luke 10:25-37

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: The One God. Amen.

In the Gospel this morning, Jesus is questioned by a lawyer. In both the Old Testament as well as in the Gospels, the setting of many of the stories is either a law court or a controversy that involves a lawyer. This is certainly the setting of the Gospel this morning.

However, the text from Luke which is today's Gospel is very different from what is recorded in both Mark and Matthew. In Matthew and Mark, the question is "which is the most important commandment?" However, in Luke, Jesus responds to the lawyer's question, "Teacher, what am I to do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus' response is absolutely fascinating. Jesus asks the lawyer, "What is written in the Law?" Then he asks, "How do you read it?" The Lawyer said in reply, first quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might" and then the lawyer quotes Leviticus 19:18, "You must love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus responds to the lawyer, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you shall live."

As Bob Edmunds' will testify, all week I have been struggling with this text and hence this sermon. I believe when Jesus asks the lawyer, "What is written in the law, how do you read it?" these are critical questions, particularly, "how do you read it?" In other words, how do you interpret it.

The lawyer, of course, is steeped in the Law, most likely he was a Pharisee. The lawyer's response to Jesus was the best Jewish interpretation of the law that one could possibly get when the lawyer quoted Deuteronomy and Leviticus. But then what Jesus says when he responds to the lawyer, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you shall live." But Jesus himself seriously challenges those words when he tells the story of the Good Samaritan.

What do I mean by this? Jesus in this text reinterprets who the neighbor is. In the first century, when a Jew heard the lawyer give his interpretation he knew that the neighbor to whom the lawyer was referring were fellow Jews. In other words, Jews interpreted neighbor as a member of the same people or religious community, that is fellow Jews.

Jews generally excluded Samaritans and foreigners from the category of neighbor. Hence the lawyer's question was basically, "Who belongs to the category of God's people?" And Jesus asks the lawyer, "How do you read this?" How do you read 'neighbor'?

In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Jesus says something critically important, "I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but I have come to give a new understanding to the law and the prophets." In the Gospel of today, Jesus gives a new understanding of neighbor: one's neighbor is not simply a person in our own clan or tribe; instead our neighbor is the Samaritan as well.

In the first century, the Samaritans were not dearly loved by the Jews. For those of you who are pilgrims in the land and for those of you who have already been to the Galilee and have returned to Jerusalem, I am sure that your guide told you that at Beit Shean, ancient Scythopolis, Jesus would have crossed over to the eastern side of the Jordan River and would have walked down on the east side of the Jordan until Jericho to avoid going through Samaritan territory. It was too dangerous for a Jew to walk through Samaritan territory; hence, Jesus would have walked the east side of the Jordan River to Jericho before he would have walked the Wadi Qelt road to Jerusalem.

Hence, when Luke puts the story of the Good Samaritan immediately after the lawyer's question to Jesus, a new understanding of the law is being understood. The story of the Good Samaritan is intimately connected with the lawyer's question, "But who is my neighbor?" Jesus' answer to this question is by telling the Good Samaritan story that the Samaritan is our neighbor. Our neighbor is no longer our tribe, but now "neighbor is understood to be a Samaritan as well." What a radical change in understanding from the Leviticus text.

An unidentified man was walking the Wadi Qelt road from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was stripped, beaten and left for half dead by the robbers. A priest, generally identified as one who had been serving in the Jerusalem Temple and was on his way to Jericho, when the priest saw the beaten man, the priest passed by on the other side so as not to defile himself by being in close proximity of a dead man.

Then a Levite, a person who was entrusted in the first century with services related to the Temple cult and rites, also came upon that place, saw the nearly dead man and passed by on the other side.

Then the Samaritan came upon him. When he saw him, he was moved to pity. The Samaritan bandaged his wounds, pouring olive oil and wine over them, put him on his animal/donkey and brought him to a public inn and made provision for him there. The next day, the Samaritan gave the innkeeper two pieces of silver/denarii and asked the innkeeper to provide for him and "on my way back I shall reimburse you for whatever you spend over and above this."

Jesus then asks the lawyer, "which of these three seems to you to have been neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The lawyer answered, "The one who showed him kindness." Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same yourself."

Jesus and the lawyer gives a new understanding of who the neighbor is. A neighbor does not have to be a member of our own tribe, but a person who shows kindness.

In this holy city of Jerusalem, everyone feels so much more comfortable in our own tribes. And I want to make a personal confession this morning. Over the years, when I have been praying the Stations of the Cross, at the Fifth Station, where Simon of Cyrene, an African, helps Jesus carry his cross, I have become painfully aware when I am standing at the junction of El Wad Street and Via Dolorosa that I am standing at one of the most diverse corners in this incredible city. One only has to stand there for five minutes and one sees

- A large variety of Hasidic Jews wearing their costumes from 18th/19th century Eastern Europe, with the most incredible display of fur hats, making their way to the Western Wall.
- Muslim men wearing a wide variety of galabiyas making their way to the Dome of the Rock.
- Muslim women wearing everything from the most beautiful hijabs to women dressed in total black from head to toe.
- Asian, African, European, North and South American pilgrims carrying their crosses, wearing their national costumes, all making their way to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

And at this junction of El Wad and the Via Dolorosa, I ask myself, who is my neighbor? Who would Jesus see as my neighbor today?

- A Hasidic Jew with his eastern European fur hat?
- A Muslim woman dressed in black from head to toe?
- A Philipino Christian flagellating himself as he carries the cross through the city streets of Jerusalem?

Today, Jesus teaches us in the story of the Good Samaritan that our neighbor is not simply a person who is in our own tribe, but someone who shows another person kindness. How willing am I to show a person who is dressed differently than I am, kindness? How willing am I to show a person who speaks a language different than what I speak, kindness? How willing am I to show a person who comes from a different economic status than I, kindness? How willing am I to embrace a person of another tribe than I, kindness? How willing am I to love the radical life of that Samaritan to take the time to bandage the wounds of that unidentified man, and to pour oil and wine on his wounds?

And the lawyer said, "The one who showed him kindness." Jesus said, "Go and do the same yourself."

In the name of God, Amen.