

**Who is your neighbor?**  
**Luke 10:25-37**  
**Sunday, February 12, 2006**

*Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 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 given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*

*Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, 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 while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.*

*The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'*

*Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This morning's passage is a familiar one to many of us and perhaps one of most famous stories attributed to Jesus. Called "The Parable of the Good Samaritan," the passage is not a parable as a literary form nor is the word "good" used even once in the 12 verses of the text. Nevertheless, the influence of this story is so great there is even a Good Samaritan Law to protect from liability those who choose to aid anyone who is sick or injured. Whether familiarity with the story or just the relief that comes in knowing we won't be sued if we assist someone in crisis, it is easy to overlook the situation in which Jesus tells the story in the first place.

A lawyer, a man quite familiar with the law of Moses, is questioning Jesus – not as a matter of inquiry but in a confrontational way. *He stood up*, scripture tells us - a stance of deviance as he confronted the unsophisticated teacher from some god-forsaken town in the hills. And, *He stood up to test Jesus*, examining the itinerate rabbi on his knowledge of the law, already knowing the answer to his own question: "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." "Good answer," Jesus says. "A+ - go to the head of the class!" That might have ended the exchange except this was just not good enough for the lawyer. He continues to push, challenge Jesus hoping to trap

him with his next question, “But who is my neighbor?” And in response, Jesus turns the lawyer’s life, and ours, upside down and inside out.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous. Narrow, steep and rocky, with sudden twists and turns, it was the perfect hunting ground for robbers to attack the merchants and travelers who frequented it. No wonder it was called “The Bloody Road” or “The Red Way.” The first hearers of this story knew the trek was a treacherous, risky highway to travel. But it is upon this dangerous path that Jesus peoples it with four characters.

Character #1: *There was a man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho.* Reckless and foolhardy, travelers seldom attempted the Jerusalem-Jericho road alone. Safety in numbers was the rule of the road. Was this man tempting the fates by going it alone? Has he only himself to blame for the situation in which he finds himself?

Character #2: *Now, by chance, a priest came down the road.* The lawyer, knowing the law as he did, knew the priest would not stop to assist a man who appeared to be dead. Touching a dead person was disgusting and would ruin the priest opportunity to be on the Temple’s worship committee. Or maybe he was just running late on his way to the Jerusalem Club for a meeting of the Jericho-Jerusalem transit authority. He did not stop.

Character #3: *So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw the man, passed by on the other side.* He seems to have gone closer to the man, at least close enough for a quick look-see before he angled off to the other side of the road. Maybe he was going to the same Jericho-Jerusalem road meeting. Or maybe he thought the man lying on the side of the road was a trap for robbers to attach him. He did not stop.

Character #4: *But a Samaritan while traveling came near him.* Upon hearing the word “Samaritan,” the hair on the lawyer’s neck went up: the villain of the story had arrived. How did his religious enemy get into the scene? An apostate? A heretic? To feel the lawyer’s blood roiling upon hearing “Samaritan” is like saying, “Then a neo-Nazi skinhead stopped to help him.” “Then a Sunni radical came near him,” or “Then a Shiite fundamentalist went over to him.” *And when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.*

“Who is my neighbor?” the lawyer had asked. The lawyer’s training would lead him to the only response he knew: “Why, anyone who is the proper object of benevolent action.” The lawyer wants to draw a line as required by law. But Jesus asks a new question and when he does, a new law – one that has no boundary - is writ upon the world: “Which one of these, do you think, was neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of thieves?” The Christ turns the table on the lawyer by putting the question back to him – not in judgment but rather offering him something more than law, custom, good behavior and morality.

Beloved, in light of this familiar story, so many of our questions, so much of our living are small, too limited. To know the right thing to do, as did the lawyer; to have

strong feelings towards the one in need, as surely did the scribe and the Levite restrain the possibility of transformation. Jesus' story shows there is no line, no boundary to the definition of "neighbor." Jesus' question extends the answer to the questions of our lives – not by knowing what to do, or what and how to feel. But rather who we are to be. Yes, it is risky and dangerous "to be neighbor."

In his sermon, "I See the Promised Land," his last and most apocalyptic sermon, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. retells the story of a man who "decided not to be compassionate by proxy." King said, "The first question the Levite (and the priest) asked was, 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But the Good Samaritan came by. And he reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"

"That's the question before you tonight. Not, 'If I stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to all those hours that I usually spend in my office every day and every week (as a pastor)?' The question is not, 'If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?' Rather, 'If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?' That is the question." King delivered this challenge April 3, 1968 – the eve of his assassination – to civil rights workers gathered to accompany the sanitation workers of Memphis, TN.

Not only does this text ask the questions, "What will happen to me? What will happen to the man?" It also asks, "What will happen to the soul of the one who does not stop? The soul of a nation or a city, the soul of a congregation or family that does not stop?" What then? Christ calls us to what Dr. King called "a kind of dangerous unselfishness."

Jesus tells this story not going down from Jerusalem but going up to the city where he will climb a narrow, steep road – a rocky place called Calvary. There he will tell us another new story. It is there he will show us what happens when God comes by and stops.