

**Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 9, Year C**  
**Luke 10:25-37**

In today's Gospel from Luke, a lawyer asks Jesus two Questions:

1. What must I do to inherit the Kingdom of God? and,
- 2.
3. Who is my neighbor?

The first question, about inheriting the Kingdom of God, is something that Jesus is asked several times in scripture and he gives different answers. This time, though, he replies with a question. He asks the man, "What is written in the law?" "How do you interpret it?"

And the lawyer, being a good and learned Jew, replies with a combination of a commandment from Deuteronomy and a commandment from Leviticus. The passage from Deuteronomy 6 is what our friend Rabbi Deb Smith told us Sisters is the Shemah Yisrael, recited twice every day by devout Jews: "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 the second is from Leviticus 19, verse 18 "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." We modern Christians refer to this as the Great Commandment, and it is so important that is repeated in all four Gospels.

So, the lawyer has provided the correct answer, and Jesus commends him and says go and do this, and you shall live, but then the man asks him yet another question:

"And who is my neighbor?"

This was a loaded question in first century Palestine, and it is still a loaded question today. The Jews at that time understood their neighbors to be their fellow Jews. Loving their fellow Jews meant helping them and taking care of them. But this love of neighbor only extended to Jews because they were believed to be the only people who were righteous, and chosen by God. This separatist attitude was typical of most ancient civilizations. It was a time of nation-building, and drawing boundaries between them and us, between who was pure and who was impure, and who was worthy and unworthy.

And then Jesus, himself a good and learned Jew, proceeds to tell a story that turns all of that "otherness" and "purity" ideology completely on its head. He tells a story of a man who is the enemy, who is the other, who behaves in a way that is far more ethical and compassionate and loving than the priest and the Levite – the two devout Jews in the story.

The story that Jesus tells can be interpreted many different ways. One way is to see the Samaritan, the man who does the right thing, as enacting the concept of, as we say in Community, Charity overruling the Rule – when we break the rules in order to act in a purely compassionate and loving manner. Jesus shows us in the Samaritan’s breaking of the rules of nationhood, of prejudice, of separateness, that all of our rules and structures are man-made, and that in God’s reality, everyone is our neighbor, and everyone is worthy of our love.

When I was preparing this sermon, it was impossible for my mind not to keep wandering to the thousands of people who are gathered at the United States’ border to the south – our neighbors from Mexico, and Central and South America, who are fleeing violence, and war and poverty in their home countries. Our neighbors from the third world, huddled at the gates of the 11th richest nation on earth.

It’s clear to all of us in this room that these people are our neighbors, and are worthy of our love, and our help. We are aware that the poverty, crime and corruption in the third world is mainly due to a system of colonialism that exploited their resources, oppressed their people and then abandoned them to corruption and chaos and of which our country, and our European allies, were very much a part.

And how then do we love our neighbors? How can we take care of them? How can we help them without making things worse? Without further enabling the cycle of corruption and greed? The recent statement from the six Episcopal Bishops of Texas provides a wise and prudent solution. Here are some excerpts:

“We call on our leaders to trust in the goodness, generosity and strength of our nation. God has blessed us with great abundance. With it comes the ability and responsibility to bless others.”

“We do this because Christians are commanded to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.”

“This is not a call for open borders. This is not saying that immigration isn’t complicated. This is a call for a humane and fair system for moving asylum seekers and refugees through the system as required by law. Seeking asylum is not illegal. Indeed, the people at our border are following the law when they present themselves to border authorities.”

These Bishops are calling for a change in the system – a loving act that will treat our neighbors with dignity and respect instead of warehousing them in inhumane conditions as they wait indefinitely in a broken system because as Christians, we see that they are not the Other. They are us.

Martin Luther King, Jr., often spoke of this parable of the Good Samaritan in light of racial and economic injustice. He said:

“On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”

And so let us hope for a world in which all the borders, and divisions, and man-made structures of entitlement and exploitation disappear, to allow for coming of the Kingdom of God.