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Luke 10:25-37
“Getting the Right Answer”

Like a beloved picture book you take off the shelf to read to a child, the Parable of the Good Samaritan begins to unfold in our minds even before a single detail is described. We picture the dirt road, a man lying beaten off to one side, the two religious figures in fine robes walking past him, and at last the simple Samaritan who helps the poor man before continuing on his way. It's a compliment to call someone a "good Samaritan." Hospitals and civic awards have been named after this parable. And in today's lawsuit-crazy society, there are even "Good Samaritan" laws that protect people from being sued if something goes wrong while they are trying to help someone in need. Bad sermons on this parable have made a point of stressing that the unhelpful characters in the story were Jewish officials, as if anti-Semitism is ever appropriate alongside the Christian gospel. Moderately bad sermons remind us that we are all like the priest and Levite, passing by people in need, but then the message is overly simplified into something like: Be nice like the Samaritan, not mean and indifferent like the other guys. My goal is not to preach a bad or moderately bad sermon. Aren't you glad I've set such a low threshold for success?

Notice how this parable is introduced in Luke's gospel. We're told that an expert in the Law of Moses asked Jesus a question. Scripture says that he did it to test Jesus, but that automatically assumes he was antagonistic to Jesus. There is a long Jewish tradition of "holy debate," of seeking deeper understanding through questions and dialogue. Or think of the Greek tradition of Plato and others, who taught through asking questions. I'm willing to give the lawyer the benefit of the doubt. Anyway, he asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life, to be right with God?" to which Jesus replied with a question of his own: "What does it say in scripture?" Mentally skimming through the Torah, the lawyer pulled out verses from Deuteronomy and Leviticus and said, "We are to love the Lord God with all our heart, soul, and strength, and love our neighbor as ourselves." The pop quiz is over; the A student has again aced the test. Jesus nodded and said, "You have given the right answer; do this and you will live."

If Jesus had stopped after the first phrase, the lawyer would have smiled and gone on his way into the obscurity of history. But as we'll come to see, it is one thing to give a right answer – it is another thing to get the right answer. As soon as Jesus said "Do this and you will live," the lawyer was faced with putting his right answer into practice. Which caused him to ask a follow-up question: "Who exactly is my neighbor?" which then led to the parable of the Good Samaritan, and the rest, as they say, is history.

I'm going to slightly stray from our topic for a moment. I've just returned from the Presbyterian Church's General Assembly in Minneapolis. This once-every-two years gathering included over 700 delegates, (half ministers and half elders), over 125 Young Adult Advisory delegates, church staff, and a lot of G.A. "groupies" who just like

attending these things. In good Presbyterian fashion, there were worship services blending traditional and contemporary elements; and there were 18 committees that met for three days – straight!

Each time I attend G.A., I am struck by the sincere faith and commitment of the commissioners, whatever their theological position. People sought to express what was on their hearts, what arose from their own encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ, without automatically demonizing those who disagreed with them. But the caveat I must add to that description of General Assembly is that the entire meeting is time-constrained. Not all 700 delegates can talk on every issue; decisions have to be made in a timely fashion or else each gathering will take two years to complete. So, yes, the group seeks to discern God's will – through careful listening to one another, times of prayer and reflection – sensing where God is working in us and through us. But paired with that process of discernment was Robert's Rules of Order – the parliamentary tools used to reach decisions decently, orderly, and quickly.

In summary, this year's General Assembly again came up with recommendations that would replace the language in our Book of Order that is being used to bar candidates for ministry who are gay and lesbian, GLBT, with more faithful language that simply says we seek officers and ministers who submit joyfully to the Lordship of Christ in all aspects of life. Commissioners voted on hundreds of other motions related to peacemaking and ending the war in Afghanistan, resolving the crisis in the Middle East, and doing more to support the young people in our churches. But some worthy goals were defeated through parliamentary maneuvers or by commissioners tired of sitting in meetings all day. For example, a report on same-gender marriage will be studied for two more years, meaning that the G.A. did not approve language that would affirm marriages exist between "two persons" and not just between "a man and a woman."

I share these details to emphasize that something happens when we spend time with others, people who were strangers but who, through Christ, have been brought into close contact with us. Discerning God's will for our life isn't about inspiration from on high, coming to us like a dove landing on our shoulder. Discernment comes from engagement, from sitting beside others in meetings humbly and respectfully, from stopping while on our life journeys long enough to talk – or perhaps to bend down and help those pushed to the gutters, those beaten and left by the ditches on the side of the road. That's where faith comes into focus and the gospel comes within our grasp.

There's an important, overlooked detail in the Good Samaritan story. The man traveling to Jericho was beaten and left for dead. Others passed him by. One stopped to help – a Samaritan, an outsider who bandaged his wounds, put him on his own donkey, and went with him to an inn. Then it says, *"The next day he gave two denarii to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him, and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'*" Think about the timing involved in all of this – it is clear that the Samaritan spent the better part of a day caring for the beaten man. He didn't pull out his cell phone, dial 911, and leave once the paramedics arrived. He didn't apply CPR and then drop the man off at the Emergency Room doors. He didn't get him to an inn, write

a check to cover some costs, and then walk away washing his hands of the whole business. No, the Samaritan evidently stayed the night with the man, quite possibly continuing to care for his needs and tend his wounds, quite likely learning his name and learning his story.

We tend to think that the focus of the story is on what happened on the road to Jericho. But the real gospel activity happened on the path between the road and the inn where the two men found shelter for the night.

Now think about this in light of the lawyer's question to Jesus. Remember how he asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" To him the law was the same as the gospel, the good news of Christ. So for him obedience to the law meant you were faithful and therefore were "right" with God. It is a checklist approach to faith – do this, don't do that and you'll get a good grade and a free pass into heaven. That's why the lawyer was so intent on giving the right answer. But flip those categories around: for Christians, the gospel, the good news of Christ is now our law. To follow this gospel means we travel a road not knowing exactly where we are going; or as Paul said, we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor 5:7). And by grace, we walk into a future more wonderful than we could ever earn on our own or deserve by our own merit.

As soon as the lawyer asked "Who is my neighbor?", as soon as he tried to fine-tune and limit the requirements of the law telling us to love one another, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan. Then he turned back to the lawyer and said, "Which of these three was a neighbor to the beaten man?" And the lawyer answered, "The one who showed him mercy." Earlier Jesus had said, "Do this and you will live." Now Jesus repeated those words, saying "Go and do likewise." Jesus didn't want the lawyer simply to give the right answer; he wanted the lawyer to get the right answer.

Getting the right answer is hard in a world that prefers law to the gospel, easy checklists of obedience over messy engagements with others that led to entanglements of the heart and wallet and spirit. It means that you and I will always have to step outside these church walls and intentionally walk down the roads of life, near the alleys and flophouses and ERs and foster homes of life; and yes, near the suburbs and malls and fancy homes concealing prescription drug addictions, divorce court proceedings, over-spent credit limits, spousal abuse cases, and just plain ol' afraid and lonely people all around us. It means stepping off the main road and wandering down the necessary side paths to inns of mercy and places of real change and hospitality. For this to happen, it requires a profound focus on the cross of Jesus Christ and a stubborn hope in the promises of the resurrected Lord – so we can "get" it and, by grace, we can live it too.

I don't know what awaits you once you leave here today. We've had our own little Presbyterian assembly. We've prayed and called upon God's spirit. We've baptized and remembered our promises to follow the Lord. We've asked about eternal life and perhaps thought we know the right answers. But in honesty, it's messier than that. Remember that in moments of compassion and listening, of service and sacrifice and stepping off to the side of the road, we discover that we're not alone. That a nail-scarred

hand extends out alongside our hand. That a prophetic, pastoral voice speaks along with our spoken words. That the answer to life's big questions are within our grasp. For in this is eternal life, our steadfast hope and salvation. Thanks be to God.

AMEN