

Proper 10C— Luke 10.25-37
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The Rev. W. Terry Miller
Church of the Good Shepherd

Won't you be my neighbor?

As a father, I'm delighted by the fact that my son Brendan's favorite sport is baseball. I played Little League myself when I was his age and it's something of a family tradition. I don't know what I'd do if he was into hockey—there was not much hockey being played in Florida back when I was growing up! This past spring was Brendan's sixth season and I enjoyed practicing with him and taking him to practice, cheering him on at games. The games were always interesting, not only for seeing Brendan and his team in action, but because the umpires seemed to enjoy calling the players on some rule or another that the coaches had never heard of. Apparently the Little League rulebook is thicker than you'd expect! But I guess sometimes knowing even the obscure rules of a game comes in handy.

Take for example what happened in Game 5 of the 2015 World Series playoff between the Toronto Blue Jays and the Texas Rangers. If you are a baseball fan, I'm sure you're already familiar with this story. The game was tied 2-2 in the 7th inning and Texas had a man on third base. The Toronto pitcher had just thrown a pitch to the Texas batter at the plate who didn't swing at the pitch. The Toronto catcher then threw the ball back to the pitcher as usual, except that he accidentally threw the ball into the batter's bat, causing the ball to bounce out into the infield. The Texas player who was on third saw this, knew what it meant, and ran home to score a run. Chaos immediately ensued. Because, as it turns out, there is a rule that covers this. When the ball hits the bat—even if thrown by the catcher—it is a “live” ball and is in play. The runner on third was correct to run home and score the run. Only the keenest of baseball experts knew that that rule existed. It is Rule 6.03, in case you want to look it up. As I said, sometimes knowing even the most obscure rules of a game comes in handy.

Now there are always experts in the rules of various games and fields, even in religion. For example you have this lawyer from today's Gospel lesson. Now, it needs to be said that this man was not a lawyer in the contemporary sense of that term. Rather, this was a religious man trained not at law school but in a seminary, a student of the Law of Moses, not civil or criminal law. He gained this status as a “lawyer” not by taking the bar exam, but by taking a Bible exam, in which he had to demonstrate his dexterity in stringing together long and complex verses about God's rules for life. It was a perfectly legitimate enterprise, but it did have one downside: when you spend your life parsing rules, commands, statutes, and laws, you sooner or later conclude that the life of faith is all about rules, about knowing which things to do and which things not to do.

Now the reason for devoting himself to knowing God's laws is not all that different from that of the person who devotes himself to learning every last rule of baseball: it's to be

able to make judgments on what is fair and what is foul in an actual game. Understanding the infield fly rule, for example, or what constitutes catcher interference is totally boring unless it pertains to actually playing the game. The knowledge does you no good when you are shopping at Kroger or working on your car. No, you need to see a game before you can use what you know. Otherwise it's just theoretical. That's why people who know the rules best tend to be the same people who play, or at least watch, the most baseball!

It's the same with people like this lawyer: he had spent his whole career studying laws and regulations. There had to be some reason, some payoff for all the trouble. And so there was. To people like this guy, religion was a giant game in which lawyers were the holy umpires who made all the theological calls.

Given all of that, it is no surprise to hear this lawyer say to Jesus, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Now, if you've been raised as Protestant, you'll know that the theologically correct answer is "nothing." There's nothing you have to do, nothing you *can* do to inherit eternal life. I mean, how can you do anything to *earn* an inheritance? It's all in the hands of the original bequeather. More profoundly, there's nothing we can do to deserve salvation. We've lost our rights, forfeited any claim to an inheritance on account of sin. The only way we receive any inheritance is by grace, as a gift from God.

But there is a sense in which the lawyer is valid. We aren't just passive bystanders. We have to embrace and live into this gift, live it out. And that's what Jesus responds to. Playing into this lawyer's hand a bit, Jesus answers, "Well, what is written in the Law? What's your scholarly assessment of it?"

Without missing a beat, the lawyer cites the civil code—I mean, Deuteronomy 6:5—as the summary of the whole Law of God: "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's right. On another occasion when someone asked Jesus for the greatest commandment of them all, Jesus quoted that same verse as his answer. So in this situation, what else can Jesus say to this lawyer except, "You are absolutely correct. Do this and you will live."

Now, for this scholar of the Law of Moses, like legal scholars today, that's not enough, not straightforward enough. Let's define the terms, he's thinking, let's be clear about what we are talking about. "So, just who precisely qualifies as my neighbor?," he asks. This may seem like a pedantic question, some academic parsing of language. But this has important consequences, namely defining where his obligations begin and where they end. You see, like any student of the law, he's looking for loopholes. You can bet that there are people in this world whom he has not loved as a neighbor. But if he could make it so they didn't count as "neighbors," then he could be justified for having so unlovingly ignored them. (He's counting on some obscure Rule 6.03 to get him off the hook.) He's looking for something that allows him to maintain the fiction of loving his neighbors, by limiting who counted as his 'neighbor.' Only Jesus has no interest in playing this game. So, instead of giving a legal definition, Jesus tells a story.

“A guy was going down from Jerusalem...” That’s how he begins. Some guy, some anonymous person of unspecified ethnicity, of indeterminate age, and of unknown origins was walking down the road. He could be anybody, and that is Jesus’ point: he *is* anybody. You can imagine the lawyer wanted to interrupt Jesus right there. “Hold it, Jesus. What man are we talking about? Can you describe him? Is he Jewish? A Gentile? Roman or Greek? Slave or free? *What* man?”

Of course, even if the lawyer asked this, Jesus would not have answered: “A certain man, some nameless, faceless guy was walking down the road and got mugged. They beat him half-senseless, stole his wallet and then left the guy naked, bloody, crumpled in the mud of a ditch.” Now, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous, riddled with thieves, unsafe to travel alone. So the fact that a man was beaten and robbed there...well, that was a familiar story. Nothing shocking. But then, two genuinely shocking things happen in Jesus' story. The first is that two people who could have helped, in fact who might have been expected to help, a temple priest and a Levite, both religious people, came up the road and saw the man in trouble, but did nothing, absolutely nothing. They intentionally avoided the man by crossing over to the other side of the road and continuing on their journey. This would be like saying that the Archbishop of New York and a NYPD officer saw the man in trouble on the sidewalk, but simply shrugged their shoulders, turned, and walked the other way. That would be a shock.

But then a third person happens upon him. A *Samaritan*. This is the second shock. For the last person the lawyer would expect to help would be a Samaritan. The expression "Good Samaritan" is so common in our culture, that most people today don't realize that "Good Samaritan" would have been an oxymoron to a first century Jew. You see, while the Samaritans in the north had once been part of the same people, with the same religion, as the Jews in the south, they had long since intermarried with foreigners and diverged from orthodox Jewish faith and practice. Such that to “true” Jews, Samaritans were considered “heretics and half-breeds.” So a Samaritan helping out this injured guy would be akin to a Nazi or member of ISIS stopping to help out a Jew. Not only would the injured man in the story not have expected any help from one of these despicable Samaritans, he probably wouldn't want any help from him either. Better to die in a pool of blood on the road than to be touched by a Samaritan! But it is this Samaritan who stops and tenderly cares for the injured man.

He approaches the man in the ditch, applies first aid in the field, and then takes the man to a hotel, where he puts him up, pays for everything, and promises to return in a day or two to see how he’s doing and again settle the account. Did the mugging victim ever learn the identity of his secret savior? We don’t know. Then again, it doesn’t matter: the Samaritan is not thinking of himself, but about helping the guy in need.

Now, at this point, you’d expect Jesus to say, “You asked who your neighbor is, and now I’m telling you: your neighbor is that anonymous man in the ditch.” It would make sense for Jesus to say that. But that’s *not* what Jesus says. Instead, Jesus turns things around and asks, “Now, which of the three was a neighbor *to* the guy beside the road?”

This is a subtle shift in emphasis, a twist, but it packs a punch! You see, we tend to think like this law scholar: we think that what we need to do is look at the people around us to determine who *out there* counts as my neighbor. But here Jesus says that figuring that out is less important than making sure that you yourself are *acting as a neighbor* to those you meet. Whoever those other folks out in society are, however they treat you, whatever they look like, whether or not they seem like people you have something in common with is not nearly so important as making sure that whoever *they* are, *you* are *their* neighbor.

“Who is my neighbor?” the lawyer asked. Jesus says, “You’re asking the wrong question. It’s not, Who is your neighbor, but Who are you a neighbor to? Are you *acting* as a neighbor?” Of course, the two questions are related: the implication of Jesus’ parable is that in fact, everyone is my neighbor and that is why I must be a good neighbor to them, why we are to be bearers of love everywhere we go. If our hearts are full of grace, mercy, compassion, and love (for both God and everyone else), then we won’t ask, “Who is my neighbor” because it won’t matter: the question becomes irrelevant if you are yourself already *being* a neighbor.

As this story shows us, the life of faith, of following Jesus, is not about knowing the rules, where the person who has memorized the “discipleship rulebook” has an edge on everyone else. You don’t have to be an expert in the Bible, have a Masters in Christian ethics, or read a library’s worth of books on Biblical interpretation to be a good Christian. I was going to say it wouldn’t hurt if you did, but actually maybe it would. Because it was the “religious types,” the so called “experts in the Law,” who missed the point of all their studying, the point of the Law—to love God and love your neighbor. To be sure, much more can be said about what it means to love your neighbor, but at the core the point is always to do good to others, to help those in need whom God has put in our path. “No more excuses, no more rationalizations,” Jesus says to the lawyer. “Go and do likewise.” Those words are intended for us too. Amen.