

Luke 10:25-37

Questions, questions. People are always asking Jesus questions. One particular question is repeated twice in Luke, once in this morning's gospel: "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Both the lawyer and Jesus know where to find the answer. Both know the other knows. The answer is found in the law, recorded in Leviticus [18:5]: "You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which mankind shall live...." Keeping the commandments, embodying the law gives. Life.

But the lawyer presses Jesus for a response. Then a curious thing happens. The lawyer answers his own question. He issues his query, and Jesus, typically, deepens the issue: "How do you read? How do you know with certainty?" An educated man stands up to tempt Jesus and ends up trapping himself: "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." The lawyer seemingly gives the correct reading, but he does not know with certainty.

As a lawyer, this man has all the resources an individual needs to fulfill the ritual requirements of Mosaic Law. As an individual, he considers himself just, righteous, deserving of reward. As a human being, he is lost. He is lost

because he has the knowledge to understand what is written in the law but not the conviction to act on it. The lawyer has forgotten that the purpose of the law is not the purification of individuals. The purpose of the law is the formation of a people, a people in relationship with God. What's more it was not with the intention of making themselves pure or holy that the people were to follow these rules. They were to follow the Mosaic Law because God is holy.

“I am the Lord, your God” he had told them. Those who would be the Lord's people would be set apart from the former inhabitants of the land by actions that would mark them as different. But it was not the acts that were holy. It was the people. They would be holy because God is holy. They would be holy because they would be bound to holiness himself. Love of neighbor issues with certainty from love of God because one's neighbor is also bound to God. The lawyer is asked, “How do you read? How do you know with certainty?” And he responds with knowledge but no wisdom, for he does not recognize his neighbor. He is near the truth, and yet, far away. He stands in the shadows of life, one step removed from the sunlight.

Recently a Sunday School teacher tried to nurture instincts of community and neighborly love in her students. She committed the error, however, of making the condition of the needy rather than the action of the loving neighbor

the centerpiece of her lesson. To a wide-eyed class of little girls, she read the parable of the Good Samaritan and described in great detail the wounded traveler---torn clothes, bruised and bleeding flesh, matted hair. At the end of this vivid description, she then asked the class, "What would you have done if you had come along and seen this man?" One ashen-faced little one said, "I sink I would have frowned up."

I'd say that was a pretty realistic response to that reading of the scripture. How do you read? You and I know that as the people of God we bear one another's burdens, but too often we are without the conviction to act on that fact. We can think of countless ways we turn away from our neighbors, countless ways we stand in the shadows rather than the sunlight of life. Too often the evils of this world seem overpowering. Many of us can recall having said at one time or another with self-centered idolatry, "I've done everything I can. It's not my fault," clouding reality and convincing us of the justice of our individualistic claims. Yes, it is easy to feel overwhelmed when we contemplate the extent of personal evil within and social evil without, overwhelmed by the scope of the demand for embodied love. And self-pity does have its rewards, as Christopher Robin's Eeyore testifies. But the burdens our neighbors bear are bound to us. Not all are physically beaten and bloody. Perhaps they're

destitute, unemployed, pregnant and unmarried, on welfare, living on the streets pushing dope or drugs, suffering from AIDS, senility, or simply old age. Like the lawyer, we would rather not hear about these burdens, rather not see the distress of others. But the burdens themselves are not the point. The point is how we respond to things we do not want to hear or see.

How do you read? One way is to follow the example of America's best known fat cat, Garfield, seated in a comfortable chair, looking out the window at his friend Odie, who peers in eagerly. Garfield says to himself, "Poor Odie. Locked outside in the cold. I just can't bear to see him like this. I gotta do something." At this point Garfield gets up from his chair and closes the curtains!

When we make Garfield's response we, like the lawyer, continue to live in the shadows of life, one step removed from the sunlight. We close the curtains because after years of struggle, we're turned off. Our turning away comes from something internal, less like Garfield and more like the Sunday School child. We look away not just because we're circumspect, but because we're self-protective. We feel sickened because in some pain-filled areas of our lives we are just plain burned out, and there is nothing left to give. There is only emptiness. But the condition of the victim, the depth of the problem is not the

point. The point is the actions of a holy people, holy because they are God's own, holy because they envision their lives in the context of the transcendent.

"Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might." A voice echoes in our memory, "Let your mind hold on to my words; keep my commandments, and you will live" [Proverbs 4:4]. "My child, heed my words; and store up my commandments with you. Keep my commandments and live; my teaching as the apple of your eye. Bind them on your fingers; write them on the tablet of your mind. Say to Wisdom, 'You are my sister,' and call Understanding a kinswoman. She will guard you..."[Proverbs 7:1-5a]. Then we remember: Yes, there resides within us pain and evil, even death, but also the promise of good.

With the wisdom of hindsight, it now seems to us shocking and incredible that humanity turned away when Hitler attempted the total destruction of European Jewry eighty years ago. But not all turned away. Their stories are still being told and will be told as readings for our souls.

A serious ecological crisis threatens the survival of this planet. We are still trying to turn away from this problem, though there is hardly any place that may be called the "shadow" in this issue! But not all turn away. The nations of the world have begun to read the signs and reinterpret a growing body of knowledge.

Turning away may be called “keeping law and order” by the ruling class of a community. If the victims are kept invisible, behind closed curtains, the newspapers and television can say that law and order have been maintained. The job of the police and military forces is to keep the “undesirables” invisible from the affluent section of the community. But there are people who do not turn away. There are people who read the misery in their neighbors’ faces and act.

The ruthless power system of our society propelled by human greed, strips and beats the weakest, leaving them half dead; but not all turn away. There are still those who know that in helping others, ultimately we help ourselves. There are still elements within us, in each of us, that know we are made of better things. We have been promised freedom from bondage to evil, but that is not the end. It is only the beginning. We can act on our vision. We can use our gifts, use them up. The whole philosophy of Hell may rest on the idea that the good one gives away is lost; but that is not the reality of the kingdom of God. In that kingdom the one who gives away with love finds no limits, only increasing abundance.

Whether or not the object of our concern is worthy is not the issue. What matters is that he or she is in need. What we do to help, not who we help is the

point. For we were once in need. We were lying beside the road broken and bleeding, and nail-scarred hands reached down to us and ministered to us in our need. While we were unworthy, Christ died for us. While we were unloving and unlovable, he gave himself on our behalf. He filled our emptiness with his body and blood and does so still, leaving for us the gift of passing on to others what we have received.

The one who reads rightly knows that relationship with God is the answer to the question of eternal life. The one who reads with certainty knows that wisdom is dependent upon what has come and is to come from God. In God and only in God, all life is made full. For there is an authority that is above the human, a telos or order that is not just material but spiritual. Loving God and neighbor with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, we will find gift upon gift added to us abundantly. Loss will be replaced by hope. Fear will be transformed by faith. Death will be turned into life. And when we locate our lives in the context of the transcendent, when we are wholly God's own, we will be more ourselves than ever.

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