

Luke 10:25-37 Pentecost 8 8/4/19

On April 18, 2010, around 5:30 in the morning a surveillance camera captured disturbing footage. A woman walking down the sidewalk in Queens was suddenly attacked by a man with a knife. A Guatemalan immigrant named Hugo Alfredo Tale-Yax came to her aid. Tale-Yax struggled with the assailant for a moment before the woman and her attacker fled. Tale-Yax gave chase for a couple of steps before collapsing. What you couldn't see in the surveillance footage was that he had been stabbed several times in the fight. Only a minute later someone walks right by. And then another man. One guy takes a picture. Another tries to shake him awake but leaves after seeing the blood. At 7:23 firefighters finally arrive. Altogether 20 people walked by as Tale-Yax lay there dying. Can you imagine? Risking your life to be a good Samaritan, then not having one person willing to do so much as dial 911 for you?

Now before we get too critical of those passersby, social scientists say this isn't unusual. And while most people think they would act in a similar situation, good Samaritans are rare. Other motivations get in the way. Like fear of getting hurt, or even being in a hurry.

People are selfish. People are petty. If there's one thing that almost everyone, regardless of race, religion, or region can agree upon, we need more love in this world. It seems if people were a little more loving Tale-Yax would still be alive. If people were more loving maybe he wouldn't have had to risk his life in the first place. But no philosophy, world religion, or self-help book has been able to adequately answer this question: "Why?"

What's the point of showing love? To make the world a better place? If that worked shouldn't the world be better? Turn on the news and you can see that's not true. No matter how many good deeds someone does, no matter how many people they inspire, at some point, they are going to fail. At some point, someone won't be inspired. At some point, that chain of love will fail.

Do we show love to get a reward? There are plenty of very very nice people who are very very poor. And there are plenty of very very mean people who are very very rich. Or maybe we mean some sort of emotional, spiritual, heavenly reward. The problem with that is humans very quickly move from an ideal "love everybody" to "just love enough."

Christians love your neighbor. We know this is good. We know it's the thing to do. But how can we?

Jesus helps a man to understand this very thing. I want to take us back to just before today's gospel. Jesus told his disciples, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see." This didn't sit right with one of the experts of the law. No one is blessed just for seeing or hearing. That's not how it works. So he jumps up and tests Jesus, "**What must I do to inherit eternal life?**" The legal expert was surprised to learn that he and Jesus were in agreement on this. "**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, Love your neighbor as yourself.**"

"Exactly," Jesus replied, "**Do this and you will live.**" Now the expert in the law felt pretty foolish for asking a question that any Jewish 6 year old could answer. So not wanting to look like an idiot he goes on, "Yeah yeah, yeah, but it's not that simple. Who is my neighbor?"

On the surface, it looked like Jesus and this man were in agreement. But there was a fundamental disagreement between the two. Jesus was saying if you want to have eternal life you need to love God and your neighbor perfectly and you need to love them continuously. That word Jesus used for “do this and you will live” means, “keep doing this.” But the man, the man wanted to know just how much he had to love. Where is the line? When is someone my responsibility as a neighbor and when are they not?”

So Jesus attempts to correct his understanding with a rather familiar story. A man is on his way through a pretty dangerous road when he is attacked. Not only do these bandits take his money and his animal. They take the clothes off his back and pummel him until he’s lying there comatose. As luck would have it a priest comes by. If any Jew should have known and loved God’s law it was this guy. But he crosses to the other side and keeps going. Then a Levite comes. Not as righteous as a priest but Levites still worked in the temple. Surely this guy would help him. But he doesn’t. Lastly, a Samaritan comes by. Samaritans and Jews had hated each other for hundreds of years. Jews would make their trips days longer just to avoid going through Samaria. But this man is the one who stops. He binds up his wounds. Pours out wine as an antiseptic and oil to soothe the pain. He puts him on his own personal donkey. He takes him to an inn. This Samaritan has already done more than anyone would have expected him. But he doesn’t stop there. He pays the innkeeper 2 denarii to take care of him. That was enough for 2 months of care. Then he tells the innkeeper he’s coming back to check on him. If any more money is needed, he’ll pay it.

After the story, Jesus does something absolutely brilliant. He turns the man’s question on its head. **“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man?”** It’s not about doing the minimum. It’s about going out of our way to show love to all. And again Jesus says, “Keep doing this.” Keep loving unconditionally. Keep loving continuously. Keep loving perfectly.

I hope at this point the man’s hopes were shattered. I hope he realized it was impossible to love half as much as that Samaritan. That it was impossible to be that kind of a neighbor—let alone to live that way every day of his life. I hope he felt hopeless because that is exactly what Jesus was trying to make him see. It was never about what he had to *do* to inherit eternal life. It was always about what God had done. God had always fulfilled his promises to the Jews. He promised their father Abraham they would go down into Egypt and God promised he would bring them out. He promised Abraham a descendant who was going to be a blessing to the whole world. Now that man had come. Jesus, the savior of the world. God had loved this legal expert perfectly. Only through Jesus could this man love others in return.

Intrigued by the story of the good Samaritan, scientists at Princeton University did an experiment. They had seminary students write a sermon on the good Samaritan and made them preach it across campus. Once they finished writing their sermon they told the students one of two things. Either they were already late and needed to hurry over to the building to preach. Or they told them they were early but might as well head over and wait there. On the way, they planted someone to violently cough and act like they needed help. 65% of those who were early noticed the actor coughing stopped to see if he was ok. Of those in a hurry, only 10% stopped.

The scientists learned some fascinating lessons about human behavior but that's not my point. These seminary students were allegedly pretty good Christians. They had just reflected on the story of the good Samaritan. At best only a little over half of them stopped to help. Christians do not love perfectly. You and I do not love perfectly.

Think of how much we struggle to love those closest to us. How often we mistreat our own family. We don't even need to get into how well we show love to those of a different race or religion. God wants us to love all people unconditionally and continuously. We don't.

All we can do is repent. All we can do is realize there is nothing we can do. We turn to Jesus. We were lying on the road dead in our sins when Jesus saw us. His heart went out to us. Jesus spent his whole life loving everyone perfectly. He made the ultimate showing of that love when he died for the world on the cross. He has loved us unconditionally and continuously. Jesus bound up our wounds of sin. He healed our festering hearts, poured out his love and grace on them and made them holy.

Now as followers of Christ, we live outwardly the same way Jesus made us to be inwardly. Jesus has made us to be holy in God's sight so we strive to live that way. The Love Jesus has shown us is the reason why Christians don't ask, "Who is my neighbor?" Instead, Christians ask "To whom can I be a neighbor?" We seek to be a neighbor to others because God sought us.

The illustration of the good Samaritan is an example of how we can do this. The Samaritan risked bandits and sacrificed his own wealth to help, of all people, a Jew. We were loved unconditionally so we love the same way. So we love our spouse, even when they drive us crazy. We love and listen to our parents, even if we don't like what they tell us to do. We love our fellow believers. We help them when they're in need and pray for them. We check up on them when we haven't seen them for a while. We even love those who disagree with everything we believe. We show that love by gently telling them the truth. We wait patiently for them to come to know the truth. We wait with the same patience God shows us.

The Samaritan loved his neighbor when it wasn't convenient for him. He kept on taking care of that man well beyond his responsibility. We too love continuously. We don't look to help people only when there's something in it for us. And we don't look to help only when we're in the mood. And when we fail to live out that love, because we will. We turn back to Jesus and the love he showed us. Christians seek to be a neighbor to everyone because God loved us.