

Saint Matthew's/San Mateo Episcopal Church

Pentecost 5, Proper 10, July 10, 2022

READINGS:

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

Psalms 25:1-9

Colossians 1:1-14

Luke 10:25-37

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

What must I "DO" to inherit eternal life?

And who IS "MY" neighbor?

Today, our readings are about these "BIG" questions.

We all want to know the answers, right? We want to do the right thing!

But, what DOES God command us to do, exactly?

And, HOW do we, as disciples of Christ, live and keep God's commands?

Moses and Saint Paul and Jesus all have something to say about the "Big Questions" in today's readings.

"What must I do," we often ask. "If God's will were only clear to me, if I just knew what God wants, I would do it! But things are complex, and it is hard to discern God's will!"

Yet Moses says in today's reading from Deuteronomy that God's voice rings loud and bright. If we listen, it sounds within us. We know in our bones what must be done. Moses tells us that the command of God is not too mysterious for us.

It isn't far, far away, either! We don't have to send someone up to the sky or across the sea to get God's command for us - it is already in our hearts and in our mouths. Moses says we only have to carry it out.

But what is "it," exactly?

In Luke's Gospel, a "lawyer" – an expert in interpretation of Jewish law - is very interested in what Jesus has to say about this BIG question.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life," he asks Jesus.

Jesus asks him a question in return: Well, how do YOU read the law?

The lawyer already knows the answer - he has studied the words of Moses all his life. He replies: Love God wholly and your neighbor as yourself!

Right! Jesus tells him. You do that, and you'll live.

But wait, the lawyer says, "Who is my neighbor"? He wants Jesus to give him a definition. He really wants to know how MUCH he must do, and for whom! Does that sound familiar?

Instead, Jesus tells the lawyer the parable of the bad priest and the bad Levite and the Good Samaritan. We all know this parable.

The idea of being a "Good Samaritan" is nearly universal in OUR day. Most of us don't realize that the words "Good" and "Samaritan" would not have been placed together by a first century Jew, because WE admire the man who stopped to help the traveler who had been robbed. Samaritans are helpful people, people we name hospitals, clinics, and laws after!

But, in Jesus' day, most Jews considered people from Samaria despicable creatures. During an ancient war, most of the Jews living in Samaria were killed or taken into exile. The few remaining Jews intermarried with other peoples in the area.

They were considered half-breeds by the "true" Jews. For them, Mount Gerazim, not Jerusalem, was the right place to worship God. They interpreted the law differently than the other Jews. Relationships between Jews and Samaritans in the first century were very hostile. In the minds of many Jews, the very idea of a "good Samaritan" was just a non-starter.

Anyway, instead of responding with the requested definition of "neighbor," Jesus tells the lawyer a story.

Not just any story.

One with details carefully chosen.

Jesus wants the lawyer to find the answer without having it handed to him.

Everybody in Jesus' time knew that the steep, twisting, desolate road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a great place for highway robbery. People got robbed there all the time, so when the victim in the story is robbed and stripped and left unconscious on the Jericho road, nobody is surprised!

The priest and the Levite are governed by temple purity rules, and do not want to become ritually impure by approaching or touching a corpse. They can't see who the man is, or even tell if he is dead or alive. So, it was really no surprise to Jesus' original listeners to hear that they passed by on the other side of the road!

The surprise came when a hated stranger, not a Judean layperson, turned out to be the hero of Jesus' story! A HELPFUL Samaritan? What? Why? Wow! Jesus' audience probably could hardly believe their ears!

After all, the Samaritan was off his turf, traveling in Jewish territory.

He had every excuse in the world to mind his own business! If someone caught him near the victim, he would immediately become the prime suspect!

But, he still chose to place himself at risk and to spend his time and his money by administering first aid and taking the victim to an inn, and even paying to see that he was properly cared for. Wow, indeed!

At the end of his story, Jesus asks the lawyer one more question.

Remember the lawyer's original question - "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus now asks HIM, "Which of these three, do YOU think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

The lawyer gets it right again! He responds, "The one who showed him mercy."

Luke tells us that Jesus says to him, "Go and do likewise."

"Go and do likewise." Jesus tells the lawyer - and us - how to live and do the will of God.

We hear, and we know in our bones what must be done. But doing it! That is the problem, isn't it?

Or is it?

I think no, IF we remember every day to practice our faith.

Like musicians learning an instrument, or kids learning to field a fly ball or paint a picture, we are all works in progress. Learning how to do God's will doesn't come all at once. We have to PRACTICE doing the right thing, little by little, every day!

Like the members of the church at Colossae in our reading from Saint Paul today, we must practice faith, love, and hope, and be witnesses to the Gospel. And just like them, we won't get it right all the time! Saint Paul tells the Colossians that he continues to pray for them, asking that they may be filled with the knowledge of God's will while leading lives worthy of the Lord. They are to bear fruit by doing good works WHILE they grow in the knowledge of God.

So, we don't have to be perfect to be good neighbors! What a relief!

We just keep praying for hearts that know what it means to be a neighbor.

We just watch for people in need, and we use our resources to help them - that's it!

It can be pretty easy. It can also be pretty hard.

Let me tell you a short story about neighbors:

My next-door neighbor, Keith, like most of us, occasionally gets a package delivered. One day the delivery driver left a set of keys that he found in Keith's driveway on the doorstep with the package. They were NOT Keith's keys. But one of the keys did have a tag on it from a nearby gym. Keith drove there, and was able to get the owner's phone number. He called, and the owner turned out to be another neighbor from down the street. He was SO glad to get his keys back. His little daughter had dropped them from the stroller on their morning walk! That was pretty easy!

Here is another one:

Bob and I were watching the Formula 1 race from England last Sunday. As sometimes happens in these intensely competitive races, there was a collision in the very first lap. A young driver in only his second year of Formula 1 competition had his car spin off the course upside down. He ended up trapped in the car, tightly stuck on its side between the tire barrier intended to keep the cars on the track and the catch fence intended to keep flying car parts out of the audience. He wasn't alone long. Another driver involved

in the collision stopped his car and flew out of it, crash helmet and all, to run and see if he could help. He stayed until the safety team came to safely extract his fellow driver, then returned to his car, which of course would not start. Because cars have to get back to the pits under their own power in order to continue racing, he was ruled out of competition in the first lap of the race. That was pretty hard!

One more:

During World War II, the German army occupied a small Greek island, where the leading figure happened to be the Orthodox Church's bishop. The German commander demanded that the bishop make him a list of all the Jews who lived on the island. The bishop took pen and paper, wrote a single name on the page, and handed it back at the commander. The name he had written was his own. I think that was really hard!

"Go and do likewise."

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It can be pretty easy. It can also be pretty hard.

Martin Luther King once reflected on why the priest and the Levite did not stop for the traveler in the story Jesus told the lawyer. I would like to share what he said.

Dr. King imagined those two men were simply afraid. After all, the Jericho Road WAS dangerous! "And so," Dr. King says, "the first question the priest asked, the first question the Levite asked was 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"

"Who is my neighbor?" The Good Samaritan shows our neighbor to be everyone, without exception! And Christ is the foremost Samaritan, leading and encouraging us to be good neighbors, and overcoming every barrier we build, and every excuse we try. The question for us is not "If I help, what will happen to me?" but "If I do not stop to help, what will happen to him, or her, or them?"

"Go and do likewise."

Thanks be to God, we don't need to be perfect. Just watching out for people in need, and using our resources to help them.

Amen.