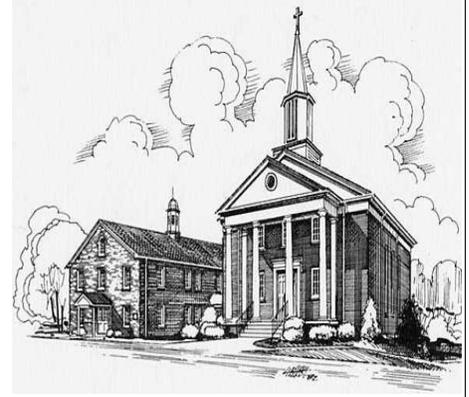


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost:

Proper 9
Year C
RCL



The Collect

O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

Moses said to the people of Israel, “The LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, when you obey the LORD your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

“Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “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 said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

SERMON

My mom had a phrase to describe those well-loved maxims of life we have depended upon for so long that we no longer critically examine them. I'm talking about "old wives' tales" like, "Don't put your hat on the bed", "A stitch in time saves nine", "Feed a cold, starve a fever". Mom called them "lumettered sayings". I have no idea where she got that word. I suspect she made it up. Her favorite was the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." For Mom, it meant be nice to other people if you want them to be nice to you. Being nice was important to Mom.

The lawyer who encountered Jesus in today's story was looking for a lumettered saying, something he could accept without thinking critically about it.

"Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Well, first of all it is good that he addressed Jesus as Rabbi, or Teacher. Lawyers aren't known for their modesty, so good on him. But look closely at what he is asking. "Teacher, what can I do to guarantee a good deal for me?" Just like a lawyer – he's negotiating a plea bargain! "What can I do to bind God into granting me immortality?"

"Inherit eternal life" or, in more contemporary terms, "Go to heaven when I die" has become a sort of lumettered saying. We don't think very critically about it, and, worst of all, we tend to see our ultimate destination as being something which we gain on our own, merits! "What do I need to do to ensure a comfortable retirement? Let's make a deal."

Some 350 years after Christ, there was a British monk named Pelagius, whose name has become associated with the understanding that human beings can earn salvation by their own efforts. Pelagianism is the belief that original sin did not taint human nature and that mortal will is still capable of choosing good or evil without special divine aid. Pelagius taught that the human will, as created with its abilities by God, was sufficient to live a sinless life, although he believed that God's grace assisted every good work.

I'm uncomfortable saying so, but I think that echos Mom's understanding. It certainly was the understanding of the lawyer questioning Jesus.

Jesus responded,

“What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

When contemporary Christians read references to “the law” they tend to think of the Ten Commandments. That's not at all accurate. There's aren't ten commandments – there are 613 Mitzvot. The lawyer gave a very good answer from those 613 Mitzvot.

He answered, “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.”

Well, he's a lawyer. It's his business to know the law to be able to summarize it. He did a great job. Now, it's up to us to understand the nuances of what he said. That's harder than we like to confess, so hard, in fact, that we tend to impose wiggle room on the teachings of Jesus as soon as we read them. For instance, when we think about loving God and our neighbor, we tend to slip into King James English. No criticism of King Jimmy's language intended, but that's one of the subtle ways we separate ourselves from Biblical stories and turn them into lumettered sayings. We distill them down into mere words. What is the lawyer not critically thinking about when he uses this dangerous little word, “love”? Let's revisit the conversation in less lumettered form and see what that reveals.

Suppose I asked, instead of the lawyer's question, “What must I do to ensure Kathy's loyalty, her skills in the kitchen, and her management of my house?”

OK...all the women should put the rocks back in their purses. The question is for illustrative purposes, only. To even propose the question in such a way is offensive, and that sense of offensiveness is what I want you to feel when you hear the lawyer ask, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Acting from love is different from negotiating a plea bargain.

The lawyer has his answer, but, like every human being who has trod this earth since the beginning of time, he immediately starts trying to carve out exceptions.

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

We're back to plea bargaining. “What's the least you will accept for me to get what I want? You surely can't mean that I'm to love everyone as much as I love me? That's impossible. Let's be clear on who I must love and who I can continue to hate.”

My friend, Phillip Slone, who retired in January after 25 years' service in the Sheriff's Department, lays comatose in a hospital bed because a real piece of work named Robert Jason Means got his head full of beer and drove a car into him. Is he my neighbor? Must I love him? I'm finding that hard to do. Can we talk, Lord? Let's make a deal.

Pelagius insists that I can, of my own will, love Robert Jason Means despite what he did to my friend. I doubt that. I can generate a lot of steam about a lot of things, but if I'm going to see Robert Jason Means as my neighbor and love him as I love myself, I'm going to need some help. I'm going to need God's Grace. To receive God's Grace I must pursue God's Grace in full knowledge of my need for it, and that's the point of Jesus' story.

The priest and the Levite walked by on the other side of the road, choosing not to involve themselves with the injured man's misery. The Samaritan, I suspect, felt the same disinclination to get involved. We all have trains to catch and bills to pay and involving ourselves this intimately with the misery of another is going to be messy.

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.

Something moved within the Samaritan, the outcast and sometimes enemy of Judea, to cause him to show compassion and by that moving of compassion, the injured man became, truly, his neighbor. That something is God's Grace. That moving of compassion comes from God and when it strikes, we are to go where it leads, celebrating that God has chosen us as an expression of His love.

The church condemned Pelagius' understanding in 418 c.e. and again in 431 c.e. The notion that we, poor creatures, are good enough to act righteously, all under our own steam, leads us to believe that we have no need of a Savior. The notion that we are the righteous ones raises us in our own estimation to be God's equal. You cannot plea bargain with God and you can't cut out exceptions to preserve your comfort. What you can do is to confess your sin, ask God for the strength you will need to be a conduit of his love, then follow His lead. We have enough meaningless lumettered sayings. What we need are words to the heart. Welcome them when they come and count their cost as nothing!

AMEN

BENEDICTION

Every night, we go to bed knowing somewhere in the back of our minds the suffering of those around the world who lack the basic necessities of life. Every morning, we rise, similarly aware of those in our own community who are threatened with ruination due to the vagaries of the marketplace and political decisions made in far-away lands. Like the priest and the Levite, we often do no more than feel bad for the victims of the world's inattention.

And yet, sometimes, by the Grace of God, we are so moved to pity that we act. We are especially blessed on such occasions.

O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.
Amen.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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