

C Lectionary 15 7.10.22

Luke 10:25-37

Focus Statement: God loves us.

I don't love running. Especially not at the beginning. I like it more now than I did when I started running—it's fun to go fast—but the relationship between me and running was not love at first sight. The truth is that I started running for two reasons. The first is running is a cheap and easy way to get the American Heart Association's recommended physical activity in, and I am a rule follower. The second is running groups are like choirs for tone-deaf people, and when I moved to Battle Creek I needed to meet people. Joining the local running club was an easy way to do that. The point is, I don't run because I love running. I run because it's a habit, and because at this point my body has more than a mild addiction to the endorphins running provides it. Habits, not feelings, are powerful motivators.

Our Gospel reading for today is probably the most well-known of Jesus' parables, the parable of the Good Samaritan. Everyone knows what a Good Samaritan is, the term is a cliché by this point. Which is really too bad, because our familiarity with it dulls the absolute insanity of this story. It is impossible to oversell just how bananas this would have sounded to its original audience. A Samaritan, doing something nice for someone. There's just no way. I can't even really come up with an example to get at just how surprising almost to the point of being offensive this story would have sounded. Like the first two, the priest and the Levite, shocking, but also kind of fun to pick on the power players. But the third one, the hero one, that one should have been an everyman, just your average traveler, coming in to save the day. That would have made this a parable about

putting down leaders, a fun, “look how great we are” kind of story, picking fun at the arrogant lawyer asking the question. The Samaritan twist makes it this whole other thing.

But let’s jump back and talk about the lawyer who stood up to, and I quote, “test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’” First some historical context, in the first century there was no difference between civil and religious law. The law the lawyer practiced was religious law, it was the only law there was. The lawyer’s test was to see if Jesus would answer the question the “correct” way, the way the lawyer knew from his own study of the law, to be right. Jesus, knowing this, flipped the question back at him, you’re the lawyer, what do you think the answer is?

And here’s the other thing to know about first century lawyers, thinking about answers was their thing. Way more than doing things, they valued thinking about things. There was even a scholar at the time who asserted, “Study of the Law is of higher rank than practicing it.” Meaning, don’t worry about actually following the law, following the law is not as important as being an expert in what the law is. In testing Jesus, the lawyer was trying to engage him in a philosophical debate about the merits of scholarship, a debate the lawyer was confident he could win. Jesus instead flipped the conversation to one of action. Good job with the thinking, Jesus told him. And again, we can’t read tone in scripture, but I always detect just a hint of snark in this response, “You have given the right answer; [now actually] do this, and you will live.”

“Do this” was not the response the lawyer was going for. He wanted debate, not action. So, he tried again, “And who is my neighbor?” Again, a question with room for disagreement. There were various laws regulating interactions between Jews and Gentiles, priests and lay people, men and women. But there were just as many laws about the expansiveness of care. Leviticus nineteen, which the lawyer seems to have pulled from in the whole “love your neighbor” line, clearly states, “You shall love the foreigner as yourself, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” But instead of engaging in the debate, Jesus, as Jesus was wont to do, told a parable. A parable that, as I mentioned earlier, it is hard to overstate just how scandalous to the point of obscene it would have sounded. The failure of the priest and the Levite at the start would have set the crowd up to turn on the lawyer and put the lawyer on alert. And when the hero was not a regular Judean but a Samaritan, that smashed everyone’s not just expectations but stereotypes. If a Samaritan can be the hero, well, nothing makes sense.

So disgusted was the lawyer by this story, that when Jesus asked him the, by this point obvious question, “who was the neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers,” the lawyer could not even bring himself to say the words, spitting out instead, “The one who showed him mercy.” The lawyer’s response is almost ironic in its correctness. The essential nature of neighborliness in the first century, and I would argue today, is active not passive. Neighborliness is not an accident of location; it is a state of being. There is an Arab proverb, “to have a good neighbor you must be one.” Jesus echoed this understanding, “Go and do likewise.”

What I love about this story, in addition to the crazy stereotype-smashing unexpectedness of the Samaritan hero, is that it says something central about the nature of faith, which is that faith is practiced, not believed.

Faith is practiced, not believed, what do I mean by that? So often, especially in our western post-enlightenment culture which is not all that different from the “study is better than practice” beliefs of our lawyer friend, we think of faith as an intellectual ascent. I’ve thought about it, I’ve weighed the pros and cons, contemplated various possibilities, and decided that this is the thing that I believe. I have decided to, as the lawyer so clearly stated as the path to eternal life, “Love the Lord my God with all my heart, and with all my soul, and with all my strength, and with all my mind; and my neighbor as myself.” If that’s the plan you’ve made, that’s a great plan, but here’s the thing. If you’ve ever been in a relationship with anyone, you know, love is a fickle emotion. That feeling you felt so strongly early on is a lot harder to maintain when that dish you’ve been passive-aggressively ignoring is still on the counter for the fourth straight day, or the friend who only texts when they need something, texts again, or the person you’re helping doesn’t seem sufficiently grateful for your help. Whether it’s God or your neighbor, love as an emotional response is not something we can count on.

But God doesn’t love us in the logical, rationed way the lawyer was looking for. God loves like the Samaritan. Think about it, there is no way the Samaritan was getting thanks or credit for what he did here. He was an unwanted foreigner in hostile territory, helping someone who wasn’t even conscious, and who had nothing to reward the Samaritan with

anyway, he'd had all his possessions stolen and left for dead. The Samaritan didn't help this guy because he was seeking some reward or even because it was the right thing to do. He helped him because, the scripture tells us, he was moved with pity. The word here translated as pity is *esplanginsthe*, it has this sense of being moved deep in your gut toward someone. It is also a word regularly used in Luke's Gospel as an attribute of God. God is one who has compassion, who shows mercy, who is deeply moved to caring, because care is who God is.

Dear people of God, God doesn't love you because God weighed the pros and cons and determined you worth loving. God doesn't love you because it benefits God in any way, because God needs your love. God loves you because love is an attribute of who God is, an action God takes towards us, again and again and again.

God loves you, and because God loves you, you can live in love. Not to earn God's love, not as a way to gain some special status, but because you are loved. Love, dear people of God, not as an obligation, but as a habit. Love because living in a world full of love is what eternal life is like. You don't have to wait to earn it or deserve it, you can just live in now. Because God loves you. Thanks be to God. Amen.