

“Trusting in and Entrusted by God Our Helper”

based on Luke 10:25-37, David Jahnke, 7/11/10

We start this week not with just any question but with THEE question; the one that the teacher of the Law asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Luke notes that the teacher of the Law wanted to test Jesus which I find interesting. Because the question of inheriting eternal life often feels like a test question with a right and wrong answer. A pass/fail course which you had better pass.

In fact I was asked a similar question at my final examination for ordination in front of the presbytery. "Is Jesus the only way to salvation?" came the question shouted from the back of the room. The gentleman was not at the mic when he asked but I heard him. So I had time to consider my answer as he walked to the mic to repeat his question. "Is Jesus the only way to salvation?" "Jesus is the Way, the truth and the life." I said to the delight of many in the congregation who started hooting and clapping. And then I went on... "and wherever saving acts are taking place, the Spirit of Christ is present and at work."

A Samaritan in the story saved a dying man. Did he "know" Jesus? No... Was he considered a heretic? Yes. Was he loving God and neighbor? Clearly. Was the Spirit of Christ present as he saved him? Absolutely.

In the end, it is finally God and not us who makes the eternal judgment call. And the boundaries regarding who is in and who is out are shaken up by Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan—in addition to Jesus' words that "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father in heaven." The question is quite profound and the answers broad and deep.

And yet there is much to say about inheriting eternal life. Both the lawyer and Jesus agree that it comes down to love. And while they begin with human love for God and neighbor, we must begin with God's love. It is God's love that makes eternal life possible. And it is God's Spirit who invites and empowers us day after day to love God and neighbor just as God loves us.

“But who is my neighbor?” asks the lawyer which I think is a very good question though his motivation for asking— a desire to look clever or trick Jesus-- was not the best motivation.

But it is a great question because of human variety and human limitations. If all the world is one human family and the earth one neighborhood, how do we go about loving the entire world— and especially those who are so different from us? Jesus answers this abstract question by telling a concrete story about whom God wants us to love.

“A man fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.”

Our answer begins with a man beaten, stripped and robbed by evil forces. And does this not represent everyone, at least from time to time? I do not mean to minimize the victims of great injustices out there. But is there anyone who does not occasionally feel beaten down by life? Or stripped naked and ashamed because of their own sin or the sins of others? How do we love God with all of our strength and love our neighbors as ourselves when we ourselves feel beaten down and naked?

Whenever we find ourselves broken, we must remember that God calls us to love *ourselves* as well as our neighbors. God wants us to do all that we can to heal ourselves and receive the healing that others have to offer. In fact the parable’s primary definition of one’s neighbor is one who cares for you! Yes it is anyone whom you care for but Jesus question is, “Which man was the neighbor to the injured man?” The Samaritan...So show yourself an abundance of grace, mercy and love and let others do the same. Replace an independent and self-deprecating spirit with God’s interdependent and merciful Spirit.

Continuing now in the parable, “Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw the injured man, 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.”

Now my natural inclination when I read this text is to jump on the priest and Levite. How dare these men of God...? But then I remembered walking past a homeless guy in Chicago without hardly giving him a glance. And struggling to explain to my son Seth why we cannot help everyone in need.

And this is a part of our finitude! We are busy people with jobs to do, like the priest and our jobs will often be interrupted by serving the needy. We have our own selves, families and congregation members to care for. And just as the priest and Levite were worried about cleanliness and the consequences of helping, we also let worry hinder how much we help. Worry over how much time will be consumed; worry over our own physical and financial security; worry over cleanliness and sickness.

And while our limitations and vulnerabilities make these concerns understandable, our model is the Samaritan who was moved by compassion to act. Compassion means to suffer with...Compassion is what my son felt as we walked past the sickly-looking beggar; he was suffering with this man. And Jesus is telling us to receive the compassion of the Kingdom of heaven like a child—and to recognize that our neighbor is whomever God places in our path, especially those who are in need of mercy.

The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes of the importance of paying attention to interruptions in life, which is exactly what the Samaritan did.

“We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God. God will be constantly crossing our paths and canceling our plans ... sending us people with claims and petitions. It is a strange fact that Christians and even ministers frequently consider their work so important and urgent that they will allow nothing to disturb them. They think they are doing God a service in this, but actually they are disdainful of God’s ‘crooked yet straight path.’”

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Martyred Christian*. Christianity Today, Vol. 30, no. 1. Copied from PreachingToday.com, copyright © 2008 PreachingToday.com & Christianity Today International.)

I have found this to be the case time and again. I know a generally good pastor who will not receive calls or visits on Thursday afternoons because they are his “sermon-writing time.” And while I can appreciate his desire to set apart time for God’s Word, I often find that God’s word and life fulfillment come to me through interruptions. When I am willing to accept God’s sovereignty and attend to interrupting calls and e-mails and visits; interruptions by extroverts in the sauna of the YMCA where I love my quiet time; interruptions in my own thoughts to call on someone; this is often when God’s Word from all of you and others actually reaches me-- as I am personally lifted up or these experiences become a part of my sermon.

So pay attention to interruptions which provide opportunities to help. Because God and a portion of eternal life are therein.

After the Good Samaritan binds up the injured man's wounds, he takes him to an inn and cares for him while he rests. The next day, he charged the innkeeper to continue to care for the wounded man. And told him he would repay him whatever costs would be incurred when he returned.

I think here we see the answer to the question of inheriting eternal life. We all indeed have been beaten up by the world. God saw a broken creation and was moved by compassion to stop and reach down into the world and provide signs of the healing that awaits us all through the ministry of Christ. We all have a good Samaritan who came from God's heaven and has healed all our fleshly wounds by the balm of his Spirit and set straight all of our broken bones by the splint of his cross.

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he said he would send his Spirit upon the church which would be a sanctuary for the world as the inn was for the injured man. As the Samaritan charged the innkeeper, so does Jesus charge his disciples to care for the wounds of the world. And he promises that upon his return, he will pay us back in full for all of our sacrifice.

And though we will not receive the full rewards until Christ's return, a portion of our inheritance is available every day. Our Good Samaritan has filled the world with his life and healing which we receive as we trust in God's eternal promises; as we accept God's providential hand in our lives and therefore approach life joyfully as it comes to us...and gracefully receive our own and the world's woundedness and seek God's healing; and as we show mercy to all whom God places in our path.