

Texts: Deuteronomy 30:9-14; Psalm 25:1-10; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

I'll bet that almost everyone here today first heard this parable – the story of the “Good Samaritan” – when you were much younger. It's a standard Sunday School lesson and if you grew up going to pretty much any church, you probably are close to having it memorized. Right? The main character of the story is someone that we know so well that we've named hospitals, nursing homes, relief agencies and all kinds of charitable organizations after him. There is even a law named for him. If you stop to help a stranger in trouble, you are protected legally for your effort.

So what's the big deal? Jesus wants us to help our needy neighbors, right? Well, yes he does, but this morning there is more to what Jesus is talking about than getting out of your car on a rainy night to help someone change a flat tire.

Over the past few weeks we have been thinking about what it means to be a disciple. We've been thinking about what Jesus asks of each of us when he calls us to follow him. We've heard Jesus say that you can't look back at what you are leaving behind. We've heard him say that you can't bring anything with you. Frankly, I'll bet you have been wondering whether it's really possible to make that kind of all-in commitment to Jesus and to being part of his mission. Well, I'm here to tell you that this morning's parable isn't going to make it any easier.

But first, I want to go back and look at the first reading, the passage from the book of Deuteronomy. The reading we have just heard comes from chapter 30 – almost the very end of the book. Prior to this are 26 chapters of commandments and decrees and laws that God gave the people of Israel to govern all of life in their community. And then there are three more chapters devoted to blessings for following God's law and curses for not

following God's law. After all of that comes this passage, and in this passage God promises that these commandments and decrees are not out of reach. They are not impossible. They are right here, written on your heart. They are right here on the tip of your tongue. The Lord your God will delight in prospering you when you love God with all your heart and soul and when you live according to these commandments.

The lawyer who questions Jesus in today's Gospel reading probably knew the book of Deuteronomy by heart. He took seriously God's instruction to observe God's decrees, to turn to the Lord with heart and soul and mind and strength. He knew that God's commandments were not too hard or too far away. He had probably followed them all his life. So when it came to his own answer to his own question about inheriting eternal life – loving God and loving his neighbor – Jesus commends him for having the right answer.

But the lawyer wants a little more definition. I worked for a law school for five years, and I met a lot of lawyers in that time. Lawyers love to define the fine points of the law by parsing out the tiniest details. Isn't that exactly what this man was doing? His question to Jesus really is the question we all have – who is my neighbor?

If I were to ask you that question, "Who is your neighbor?" I'll bet that most of you would bring to mind someone who you know, someone who looks, speaks and acts like you do. It might be the person who lives on your street, maybe even right next door. But what the lawyer was really asking was the opposite question: "Who is NOT my neighbor?" How far am I required to extend the love that God commands – who can I place inside the circle and who can I leave outside?

By the time Jesus told this parable Jews and Samaritans had hated each other for 1,000 years. It had to do with how each group worshipped, and how they traced their

ancestry. If you think that ethnic and religious hatred in the Middle East is a modern phenomenon, think again. Notice that when Jesus asks the lawyer who in his parable was the neighbor to the man who has mugged and left for dead, the lawyer can't even bring himself to speak the word "Samaritan." For him, this story is not about a "Good Samaritan." It's about a "Hated Samaritan."

"Who is my neighbor?" we ask, along with the lawyer. But the question really is, "Who is my Samaritan?" Who is the person who I would never in a million years speak to or want to be associated with? In the political climate right now, all the candidates have made long lists of people that could count as being Samaritans. And we know who they are because we have been taught to hate them.

Let's come back to the parable itself and look at a couple of details more closely. Both a priest and a Levite, religious men, come down the road and see the man lying in the ditch. Jesus uses the exact same phrase to describe their reactions. He tells us that they "passed by on the other side." Each of them went out of their way to cross the road so that they wouldn't have to get too close to the bloody, naked, half-dead man lying there. I'm sure that each of them knew their book of Deuteronomy by heart as well. They each knew that to touch a bloody body would contaminate them, make them ritually unclean.

But the Samaritan – the hated, reviled Samaritan – Jesus tells us that he "came near." He reached down to touch. He rubbed oil and wine on the man's wounds and then bandaged them. He helped the man to his feet, laid him on his own animal, and nursed him when they got to the inn.

All through the gospel of Luke we find Jesus doing the exact same thing – touching people to heal them. Touching people who are untouchable: lepers, people possessed by

demons, women, blind people, disabled people, dead people. It's not that Jesus doesn't love the laws and commandments of the book of Deuteronomy. But he refuses to allow those laws and commandments to get used in ways that keep other people outside the circle. In order to be a disciple, in order to inherit eternal life, you have to get close enough to other people to touch them. To touch them with compassion and mercy, just like the Hated Samaritan did.

Little Xavier is here this morning with his family and in just a few minutes we are going to watch God come close and touch him. Make no mistake -- this is Jesus' own work that we do with our hands, touching this newest disciple with water and oil as God names him and claims him and gives him the promise of eternal life.

Giving birth and raising a baby mean that you get dirty, right? There was blood when he was born. Now there's drool and spit-up and poop, dirty clothes and dirty diapers. Before too long, there will be blood again once he starts running in the playground and climbing trees, cuts and scrapes and bandages. None of that matters, right? Because all you want to do is to touch him and hold him and snuggle him. You can't take care of a baby without touching him. Touch means family. Touch means protection. Touch means nourishment and comfort. Touch means love. God's love is going to touch him this morning and it's going to feel like warm water splashed over him three times and the shape of a cross traced on his head.

And little Xavier is going to grow up and hear Bible stories and learn about Jesus. He will learn about how Jesus loved everyone, especially little children. He will learn about how Jesus touched people and healed them. And eventually he will learn the story of a

Hated Samaritan, a man that we now call the “Good Samaritan”, who did the same thing that Jesus still does, leaning in close, touching and healing, offering mercy and compassion.

That’s what it means to follow Jesus. That’s what it means to be a disciple. That’s who we are called to be. Now go and do likewise.