

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
July 14, 2013  
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost  
The Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Deuteronomy 30:9-14  
Psalm 25:3-10  
Colossians 1:1-14  
Luke 10:25-37

Our collect for today summarizes the essential thrust of our Scripture lessons as it states: “grant that your people may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them.”

Our Scripture lessons illuminate this twofold concern to *know* God’s will and to *do* it. They show us what it is that God asks of us, and they reveal the promise of God’s grace as our source of power to be able to live like God asks us to live.

The answer to the first question, “what are we to do?” Is summarized by Jesus in his discussion with the expert in religious law. Jesus asks him what the Law of Moses says, and he replies: “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself.” (Lk. 10:27)

This, then, is what the Scriptures ask of us. This is the revealed will and plan of God for his people. If you wanted to reduce the essential claim of Scripture on all those who read it to one simple sentence, it could be this: *love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself.* Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*,

renders it like this: “Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence – and love your neighbor as well as you do yourself.”

In the words of our liturgy, “on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Now the religious expert with whom Jesus speaks does not pull this from thin air. It goes back to Deuteronomy 6:4-6, that famous portion of the law known as the *Shema*, where God (through Moses) commands the people to love him wholeheartedly in response to his great love for them. This command is echoed in our lesson today from Deuteronomy 30, as Moses is once again calling for complete obedience on the part of the people.

Now it is one thing to hear this injunction to love God and neighbor. But how do we actually *do* it?

John Wesley had a belief that when God commands something in Scripture, behind that command is a promise of grace to help us fulfill the command and live like God desires. In other words, the ability to love God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself is not merely an ideal target at which we aim but never hit. It is a gift of God’s grace and results from a process of inner transformation and renewal.

This kind of inner renewal is part of what the Psalmist and the apostle Paul are speaking about today as well, especially as they focus on the process of teaching and instruction in the ways of God.

So then, if the Scriptures command us to love God and neighbor, and if God gives us grace to help us do so, what does life look like when we do it?

One answer to that is the story of the “Good Samaritan” in our Gospel lesson.

Now to those listening to Jesus, the title “Good Samaritan” would have been a misnomer. A contradiction in terms. For those listening here to Jesus, there was no such thing as a “good” Samaritan. The only “good” Samaritan was a dead Samaritan. The Israelites’ hatred of the Samaritans went deep, both on a personal as well as a national level.

The Samaritans were a mixed race of people tracing their descendants to those who occupied the land of Israel following the conquest by Assyria in 722 B.C. They opposed rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem (cf. Ezra and Nehemiah), and constructed their own place of worship on Mt. Gerazim.

Samaritans were considered to be ceremonially unclean, unfit to be in the temple. They were viewed as social outcasts. And their theology and interpretation of Scripture was so “off base” as to be laughable. The word “heretical” would be a mild term to describe these folks, at least to those who were

listening to Jesus tell this story. The last term Jesus' audience would use to describe a Samaritan was the term "good."

At this point in the sermon, I'm stuck, and I'm not sure I can go any further. I am compelled to ask of you a vital question: *Who in our society, who in our culture, who in our community, fits the above description for us? On whom are we prone to look with hatred and suspicion? Whom do we view as being "beneath us" morally, spiritually, and otherwise? Which group or groups have totally lost their way in their handling of the Bible? Who are the people who you would never invite to your home for a meal?*

Who is it that might be for us the modern day Samaritan? Unless we can answer this, I'm not sure we can hear this story in its fullness.

And let's turn for a moment to the Priest and the Levite. It is easy for us to wag our fingers at the priest and the Levite in this story, to scold them for their heartlessness . And I will grant that their behavior is appalling to our sensibilities. But it was not without reasons.

For one, the injured man along the road could have been a "plant" or a decoy used by thieves to trap unsuspecting travelers and rob them.

Not only that, but the Scriptures forbade these men from coming into contact with a dead corpse, because that would disqualify them from their temple

duties. To the extent that the priest and Levite thought this man might be dead, that would also be just cause *not* to stop.

Perhaps we could look at it this way. Passing by this injured man presented the Priest and the Levite with a choice between duty and *duty*. Who of us has not faced a similar situation at some point in our lives?

I have. I remember when Connie and I were in Toronto, I was serving as an Associate Minister at a Presbyterian church in the East end of the city. One particular Sunday when it was my turn to preach, I found myself hurrying out the door of our 17<sup>th</sup> floor apartment to the elevator.

When the elevator reached the lobby of our apartment, there was a couple there who approached me. They were dressed strangely to me, in some sort of middle Eastern dress, and spoke very broken English. They told me their car had a flat tire, and could I please help them change it? I sensed that this couple was in genuine need. But I was running late for church, and I had to preach. I mumbled some sort of lame apology and hurried out the door. I've never forgotten that moment.

And I suspect that if we were to ask who we are in this story, we are much closer to the priest and Levite than the Samaritan. (If you don't agree, just try to convince me that you are a social outcast and religious heretic.)

Which is why it is significant to me that Jesus does not answer the religious man's question, "who is my neighbor?" At least not directly.

Instead, what does Jesus do? Jesus tells this young man to *be a neighbor*, to love others impartially and to expect nothing in return. He tells a story that redefines "neighbor" not in terms of race, religion, or proximity, but in terms of *vulnerability*.

This leads me to believe, then, that when I ask the question, "who is my neighbor?" I am asking the wrong question. Instead of asking, "who is my neighbor?" I should simply be busy *being* a neighbor. If I have to ask "who is my neighbor?" then I don't understand what Jesus is trying to say here.

As I thought about Jesus' words this week, I had to confess an unpleasant truth. I had to acknowledge that there are some people in this world that I would prefer to *pity* or even *hate* rather than to love. And a part of me said to Jesus, "Lord, what you're asking is simply too hard for me. It's out of reach. It's a nice ideal, but we live in a real world."

Then these words from Deuteronomy came to me:

*"this command I am giving you today is not too difficult for you to understand or perform. It is not up in heaven, so distant that you must ask, 'who will go to heaven and bring it down so we can hear and obey it?' Is it not beyond the sea, so far away that you must ask, 'who will cross the sea to bring it to us so we can hear it and obey it?' The message is very close at hand; it is on your lips and in your heart so that you can obey it."*

As we come to the Table this morning, I invite you to do two things.

First, if you haven't already done so, tell the Lord that you relinquish the prerogative of deciding *who* your neighbor is, and allow him simply to help you to *be* a neighbor.

Second, come with gratitude in your heart, knowing that when God asks something of you, he gives you grace and power to do it.

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