

“The Love of Our Neighbor”

Luke 10:25-37

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Our text this morning is an all too familiar story that we have been told all throughout our lives. If you attended a Christian school growing up, it was likely posted somewhere in the building or taught as a way to teach the kids how to act appropriately toward one another. Even the secular world tries to use it as a way to show how we ought to behave toward those less fortunate than we are. It has become a parable of the Law in most every case that it is used. But if we are to understand properly what Jesus is explaining to this lawyer, we have to unwrap the reality that when Jesus speaks in parables, He is speaking about the Gospel, and not the Law. More specifically, He is speaking about the Kingdom of God, and the reality that it has come in His person. With that understanding in our minds, we now look at the parable before us this morning—the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Most preachers will teach this as a parable of the Law, as I just referenced. They teach that it is an example of what it truly means to love your neighbor. To be a good neighbor you must sacrifice everything for another. You have to clean their wounds, give them clothes, pay for their hotel as they recover, and so on. According to these purveyors of the Law, you must be the Good Samaritan, and not the evil Levite or priest that passed by the robbed and beaten man. If we are to be good keepers of the Law and obey the command of God to “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 (Luke 10:27),” then we must do our part to care for our neighbor.

The issue of caring for your neighbor, in the way that these people teach this parable, has become a theology of good works. It turns the Law into a theology of glory, instead of a theology of the cross, which is where it finds its roots. Nothing about the Lord’s teaching in this passage is meant to lead us to an idea that we have to give everything we have away to those who have less than we do, or to sacrifice our own well-being to serve the good of others. Those are all things that we do out of faith from which our good works flow, but they are not the solid foundation upon which the Lord is building in this Gospel proclamation. The essence of this teaching is founded in His atonement. It is founded upon the salvation of man by grace alone, through faith alone, by Christ alone. And the Lord can’t make that any clearer than He does.

He tells the man, “Do this, and you will live.” Well, that seems to sound a lot like an affirmation that his good works toward God and his neighbor will save him, doesn’t it? If you don’t properly understand the parable, then yes, and we’ll get to that in just a moment. Then he asks Jesus for clarification. If he is going to do this and live, then he has to know who it is he should do it for, right? So, in order to understand Jesus’ answer we must first properly interpret that which He says following the lawyer’s question of, “And who is my neighbor?” An important distinction is made by Jesus as he tells this parable, and it is one that is the cornerstone of showing this to be a parable of the Gospel, and not one of the Law.

While we do not shy away from the third use of the Law—and there are some good third use principles contained here—this is not the purpose of Jesus’ parable. He is not berating this lawyer about his works, or giving him some divine rule by which he must now live his life. If this parable were about being the good neighbor to all regardless of race, creed, or status, then Jesus would have flipped the script. The injured man would have been the Samaritan and the one who helped him a Jew. The animosity between the Samaritans and the Jews is well documented throughout the Biblical history. And the majority of this animosity was one way, that is, from the Jews toward the Samaritans. Just recall the words of the Apostles James and John in Luke 9:54 in response to the Samaritans rejecting Jesus, “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” Or the words of the Samaritan woman to Jesus at the well in John 4:9, “The Samaritan woman said to Him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?’ (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)”

So, you might see how this parable would be shocking to the lawyer. A Samaritan helping a Jew? That’s outrageous! You can almost hear the thoughts of this man welling up inside of him in indignation and confusion. But as Jesus finishes the story, note that He doesn’t ask the man, “Would you have helped the injured man?” He simply asks which of the three was the most neighborly to this man. It forces the lawyer to think, to take himself outside of presuppositions about who his neighbor is, and simply acknowledge the good work of another who is scorned by the Jews, and yet helps a Jew. Jesus is not calling for the man to put himself in the shoes of the Samaritan, but calling him to the realization that he is the injured man who needs the help of his neighbor. The heart of this parable is not in teaching us to help our neighbor, but to turn our hearts to the reality that we need our great neighbor’s help.

We need the help of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Only He can lift us up out of the gutter, mend our wounds, and give us shelter from the troubles of this life. It is by

His bloody sacrifice of atonement that we have the help we need, and the help that only comes by His glorious grace. And we never have to look far for the comfort that He provides. The Samaritan saw this man injured and terrified and had compassion on him. Just as the Lord says to Moses in Exodus, which Paul quotes in Romans 9:15 “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” He bound up his wounds, pouring oil and wine over them, giving him the medicine he needs to sustain him as he heals. Is this not what we receive from the Lord in the Holy supper of His body and blood? Luther says in the Large Catechism (LC V 23-24):

There are so many hindrances and temptations of the devil and of the world that we often become weary and faint, and sometimes we also stumble. Therefore, the Sacrament is given as a daily pasture and sustenance, that faith may refresh and strengthen itself so that it will not fall back in such a battle, but become ever stronger and stronger.

And further solidifying the Sacramental nature of what Jesus is saying, is the reality that he leaves the man in the care of an innkeeper until he returns again. This is an often lost point in this parable, and it is indeed lost in the Law-based understanding that pervades most of Christianity. As the one who is called to administer the Sacraments according to Christ’s institution, the pastor is called to care for the ones that God has placed in his care—to provide them the medicine of immortality that heals the wounded soul, and proclaim the truth that Jesus Christ will indeed return and bring them to their eternal home. No matter the cost, Jesus has covered the bill. He has purchased it by His blood, which the pastor now shares with all those whom God has called him to serve. But again, even this is not an elevation of the work of the pastor. This is an elevation of the work of Jesus Christ in and through him as His called servant.

The lawyer to whom Jesus speaks is not capable of doing anything that the Lord commands, if he is not first in the faith of the one who can do these things. And even then, it is not the one in the faith who does them, but the work of Christ in and through them that engenders these great acts of love toward our neighbor. So, the Lord’s commands to “Do this, and you will live,” and, “Go, and do likewise,” are not a call to works, but a call to repentance and faith in Him. That is the message of the parable of the Good Samaritan. As those who are one body in Christ by our baptisms, it is “no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me,” as Paul says in Galatians 2:20. And for that reason alone, and by that power of faith that dwells in us, we “go, and do likewise,” proclaiming our faith to the world by what we do in love for our neighbor.

And as we walk in the shadow of a sin-darkened world, we are indeed called to care for those around us, providing physical help in times of need whenever we are able. But even more than that, we are called to care for the spiritual needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ, and to proclaim the Gospel to those who are lost every chance we get. It is not about love for our neighbor, but the love of our neighbor, the love of Jesus Christ which sustains us in all things. His love is the reason we have been given the gift of faith, and out of that love we then love others by proclaiming His love to them. We call them to repentance, and we call them to receive the free gift of forgiveness which He provides in the means of Word and Sacrament ministry. We are not the Good Samaritan. Jesus is the Good Samaritan.

He is the one who sacrificed everything He had, becoming incarnate by the Holy Spirit to humble Himself even to death on a cross. This great act of love from our God was done for you, to pick you up out of the dirt, filth, and injury of sin, that you might be redeemed from the bondage of sin, death, and the devil. Our Gospel lesson this morning is no Law mandate to good works for our neighbor, but a message of deliverance by our neighbor, our brother, Jesus Christ. His love and His great act of kindness is what makes us members of His Kingdom. We stand in the light of His grace because He has shown us His glory, and by faith we reflect that glory to others in our fruits of that same faith. By His love we know how to love our neighbor, and by His love we will stand forever in the light of His divine glory, dwelling together with Him and all the saints in the eternal home of our loving God. Amen.