

Pastor's Message – 7/10/2022
 Luke 10:25-37

As I was reviewing our Bible reading for today earlier in the week, one of my pet peeves jumped out at me and I thought maybe I would preach on that today. It's the practice of cherry-picking the Bible: picking one verse out of one paragraph out of one chapter out of one book out of the whole Bible to explain all there is to know about God and about faith and practicing faith.

One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: "Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?" his question seemed to be, "What are the minimum requirements that God places on me?" or "What's it going to cost?" I talked a little bit about the cost of discipleship last week and here it is again in our Bible reading for today.

The familiarity of the parable in our Bible reading today may not play in its favor. When we retell this much-loved tale of the Good Samaritan, we run the risk of enabling some complacency about it. Without an intentional push in another direction, we might just hear a nice Bible story about a man who is helped by another man on the road.

But Jesus didn't tell parables in order to be nice. He used parables as indictment against the prevailing consciousness of the time, as a finger pointed squarely at the powers and principalities, inviting them to take a closer look at themselves. Maybe we need to look at it from a different perspective?

Just then, a smart aleck kid in the class stood up to test Jesus and said, "Okay, Mr. J, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He smirked, snickered and high fived the kids sitting next to him.

Jesus answered him, "What? Did you skip Sunday school? What's it say in the Bible?"

The smart aleck said, "It says to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength, and with all your, uh..."

"Mind?"

"Oh, yeah, your mind, too." Smiling at his friends, he added, "And your neighbor as yourself."

"Well," said Jesus, "there ya go. Do that and you got it covered, you'll live."

But the smart aleck felt a little embarrassed because all his friends were looking at him so he said, "Uh, okay. But, uh... but, who's my neighbor? Yeah, answer that one, Mr. Messiah dude. Who's my neighbor?"

Jesus answered him with a story: "Okay, so there's this guy, a businessman, and he's in a hurry to get to Jericho so he decides to take the road from Jerusalem to Jericho by himself."

The smart aleck and his friends interrupted: "Whoa, not cool, man." "Way too dangerous." "That road's been classified unsafe, Dude. No one travels that road, especially by himself." "For real, man." "Way too dangerous."

"So anyway," Jesus said, "His car breaks down and these robbers jump outa the bushes and rob this guy, pistol whip him, strip him naked just to humiliate him and steal his car and leave him for dead right in the middle of the road."

The smart aleck just nodded his head, knowingly, "Gangster, man," he said.

"Word," Jesus replied. He paused to let it all sink in, then he went on with the story.

"But the story doesn't end, there. Not too much later a minister comes driving down the road in his Prius and he sees the man lying there, in the road, but he doesn't help. He just lets the man lay there."

"No way!"

"Yes, way. He just drives by. Oh, he pauses for a minute and he thinks about helping the man but then, he starts thinking about all the what-if's. You know, like what if he's not really hurt? What if this is an ambush and when I get out of the car to help him his friends jump out of the bushes, beat me, and rob me?"

"And he thinks about, what if he is hurt and I try to help him but I'm not a doctor so I might do something wrong and he sues me and maybe even my whole church? He tried to remember if the

church's insurance policy covered him in such a situation. Isn't there something called a Good Person law that protects people who try to help someone? He asks himself. But what if there isn't?

"And then he thought about his church and his family: If it was just me that I had to worry about that would be one thing. I would jump out of this car and help him in like a New York minute, but I have a family and I have a church that could be ruined if he sued us.

"Then he decided: No, I just don't have the right to put my church and family in danger just because I selfishly want to help this one guy who may or may not really be hurt. So, I'm going to just drive around him and leave him lay here and probably someone else, someone with not so much to lose, will stop and help him, I mean, if he *really* needs help, ya know?

"So, he just drove around and went on his way."

The smart aleck and his friends couldn't believe what they were hearing. They just looked at each other and shook their heads.

Jesus went on: "About an hour or so later another man came driving down the road in a big, black Jaguar, quiet and smooth as you please. He was a lawyer and a leader in his church."

The smart aleck and his friends high fived each other. "Alright! Now, my man's gonna get some help."

But they were wrong.

Jesus shook his head. "No, my friends. The lawyer just drove on by, as well."

"No way!"

"Yes, way, I'm afraid. Very much way. The lawyer wanted to stop. He really did. But he had some worries as well. See, he was on his way to a meeting where he and a bunch of other people were going to work on ways to feed hungry people, thousands of hungry people.

"So, he thought to himself, If I miss this meeting thousands of people might not get fed. And if I stop to help this guy, who's probably already dead, I could miss my meeting and all those people would go hungry. And aren't thousands of hungry people more important than one guy laying in the road?

"He decided that the thousands of the hungry people were more important, so he left the one man lying in the road and he drove past him and went on to his meeting."

The smart aleck looked at his friends and said, sadly, "I think our man may be dead. Yeah, if someone don't help him pretty soon, I think he may be a goner." Then he looked at the sky and said, "Come on, people!"

Jesus said, "Well, it was getting late, but there was one more person coming down the road. A woman. And she was wearing one of those things over her head, a hijab, so she's probably a Muslim woman."

One of the smart aleck's friends rolled his eyes, "Oh, great," he said. "Our man's a goner."

But the smart aleck shushed him. "Chill, man. Give her a chance."

Jesus waited for the group to quiet down, and he went on with his story.

"So, the woman, she's driving this old, beat up, Ford F150 pickup truck, see? And the windshield is so dirty that she can hardly see the guy lying in the road, but she does, just in time, and she stops and looks out the dirty windshield and then the other windows, too. Kinda looks around, you know?

"Then, real slow and careful like, she gets outa the truck and goes over to the guy and feels for a pulse and, whataya know, the guy's still alive. And, just his luck, she's got a first aid kit and some blankets in the back of that old 150. So, she gets him cleaned up and bandaged up and puts a splint on his arm, and she feeds him some chicken soup outa the thermos bottle in her lunch box and he looks like he just might make it if he has someone to take care of him for a couple of days.

"She puts him in the back of her pickup and takes it real slow going down the road until she comes to this little old mom and pop motel called the Capri Motel or the Buena Vista Motel or something like that, one of those old-fashioned places, you know.

"And she talks to the couple who own the place. She says, 'Keep him here for a few days and take care of him. Change his bandages and feed him and make sure he gets some fresh air and sunshine and

exercise.’ Then she takes some money out of her wallet that she keeps on a chain hooked to her blue jeans and she gives some to the couple and she says, “This should cover the first couple of days. I’ll be back this way at the end of the week and if there’s more due, I’ll pay you, then.’

“The old couple huddles up and they’re a little worried. What if she doesn’t come back? What if the wounded guy has some kinda disease? What if he’s a bad guy and his friends come back this way and rob us? What if he dies and someone blames us? You know, all that what-if kinda stuff. But eventually they figure, well, if she’s willing to take the risk I guess we can take a risk, too. So, they agree to help the man and they shake the woman’s hand and it’s all settled.”

“So,” Jesus said, looking around. “Who was this man’s neighbor?”

The smart aleck and his friends looked around at each other for a moment, then the smart aleck spoke: “Well, I guess I gotta go with the Muslim lady,” he said.

Jesus smiled and held out his fist. “There y’go.” he said as the former smart aleck bumped fists with him.

Some churches give customer satisfaction surveys to those who worship with them for the first time. They ask them to rate the coffee and donuts, the music, the nursery, and (heaven forbid) the sermon.

Jesus, though, is more interested in our service to mugging victims -- to those robbed, stripped, and left by the side of the road. How are we doing?

If we asked those standing on street corners holding up cardboard signs, or victims of domestic abuse, or those in prison, or the addicts and alcoholics, would they be satisfied with the service they receive from the church?

When we consider the victims of racism, sexism, poverty, and the drug epidemic, how would they rate our service?

What results would we expect if we handed out satisfaction surveys to those closest to us? How would our children, spouse, coworkers, and next-door neighbors rate the quality of service and love they receive from us?

Loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and loving your neighbor as yourself are more than platitudes to include in the mission and vision statements of congregations. They are to be lived every day.

We are to love not only with our hearts, but also with our hands and feet. Like the Samaritan, we are to be moved with compassion to give of our time, resources, and money to those in the most need. We are called to offer what we have to bring healing to the victims around us.

The lawyer came to Jesus wanting to justify himself. He wanted to hear if he was doing enough to get into heaven. We often ask the same question today.

We can answer the question by how and to whom we give and share our resources. In our weekly giving to this Church, we support its ministries and the work of the larger church in the State and around the world. Every week, we have the information to donate to UMCOR specifically for relief because of the war in Ukraine, but there are hundreds of projects and needs around the world that UMCOR supports.

For over a year now, there has been a box in the Sanctuary to receive donations to the Waupun Food Pantry. This month the target donation is crackers, last month it was applesauce, next month it will be pasta sauce and maybe the pasta to go with it. This church has donated personal care products, paper products and so much more. It is so encouraging to see all the donations come in week to week. I just received a call for food aid this past week and was pleased that this Church is helping to keep our area Food Pantry stocked.

We all want to be good stewards of the gifts that people, faithful, loving people have given to the church for the purpose of doing God’s will in the world. At the same time, we don’t want that money to be wasted or stolen or frittered away on meaningless, silly things.

So, we’re careful about how we spend it.

We don't just give it away to anyone with their hand out.

We set it aside and we pray over it and then we make sure that the causes we give that money to are vetted and verified, checked out and checked over, genuine, trustworthy charities.

We aren't about to take unnecessary risks with other people's money.

The problem is that no matter how careful we are, no matter how thoroughly we vet those outfits that are asking for our money, there's just no way to be absolutely, positively, certain that they are 100% on the up and up.

There's no way to guarantee that we're not going to be cheated.

But that's okay.

Because being charitable is about who we are, not who they are. It's about being kind, generous, charitable people as Jesus called upon us to be.

And sometimes kind, generous, charitable people get taken advantage of, no matter how careful they are. Sometimes, they even get crucified.

Jesus came, he said, to fulfill the law and the prophets. He said we should love God with all of our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and those four words are not simply four synonyms for the same thing.

- The *heart*, biblically speaking, is the seat of the spiritual life, of the inner being.
- The *soul* is life itself, and that includes feelings and desires.
- The *mind* refers to our understanding and intelligence, meaning that we put those things at God's disposal.
- And our *strength* is our capacity and power to act.

Jesus came to launch the Kingdom of God upon earth and then called his followers to help in that kingdom-building process. He called his followers to start a kindness contagion. From a theological perspective, the source of all this goodness is God. Writing to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul says that "God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work." In other words, God's generosity rubs off on you, making you more generous. And then, says Paul, "You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity" (2 Corinthians 9:8, 11). You'll be enriched — you'll get a "helper's high."

Thousands of years after Jesus and Paul, modern research is confirming this contagion. Stanford assistant professor of psychology Jamil Zaki has spent a number of years studying how kindness can be transmitted. "Kindness itself is contagious," he writes in *Scientific American*. "It can cascade across people, taking on new forms along the way." He has found that people make larger charitable gifts when they believe that others are being generous. And in situations where people cannot afford to donate, one individual's kindness can inspire others to spread positivity in other ways.

So, where do we start? One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: "Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus turned the man's attention from himself to God's bigger dream. Then he popped the question: "Which of these three was a neighbor to the man by the road?" then he said, "Go and do likewise."