

September 6, 2020

*"What is Written in the Law"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 10:25-37

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I don't know how many of you remember a sermon I preached on June 7th of this year, entitled "What's to Prevent Me?" but let me refresh your memory. I'm going to read it exactly as I preached it that day. Last Sunday morning (May 31st ), when John and I were leaving for church and driving out of our neighborhood onto Sandwich Road, we noticed that somebody had put out a sign saying "Black Lives Matter." I'm sure all of us have seen that sign recently. "Black Lives Matter." Now I think it goes without saying that any right-thinking person, anyone with even an ounce of understanding and compassion, when they read that sign, would think, "Of course, black lives matter." We both thought that. But my husband, being the far more caustic one in the family, immediately said, "I'll bet you that sign will be gone in twenty-four hours." And sure enough, it was!

Yes, that's how I started my June 7th sermon. And now it's three months later. And, at the risk of being accused that I'm politically incorrect, I am going to state out loud that not only do I believe that black lives matter, I believe every life matters. That's right - every life! But that's a discussion for another day. Let me get back to the sign. Well, our neighborhood association had its annual community meeting in late June, and John, being on the board of the association, made a plea to leave the sign up given the emotion and circumstances around the death of George Floyd. And everyone who was there agreed. But after a few days, guess what? The sign was removed. After it was removed, guess what? It came back again. And it was removed again. And now it's back. John calls it the "Jesus" sign because of the number of times it's been resurrected. Well anyway, a couple weeks ago, things came to a head. It seems some folks in the neighborhood, which consists of twenty homeowners, read the bylaws and found that no signs are allowed on any association property. Even though the spirit in which the sign was put up was agreed upon by all, there is a condition in the bylaw that prevents it. Did you all get that? The issue of the Black Lives Matter sign has come down to what is written in the law. What is written in the law.

And that is what today's parable is all about. Because that's exactly how Jesus responded to the lawyer who was testing him. The lawyer asked Jesus, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answers by asking him a question, "What is written in the law?" The law to which every Jewish person is supposed to adhere. "How do you read, and interpret, that law?" Jesus asks him. So the lawyer pulls out his Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, and repeats from Deuteronomy chapter 6, verse 5, "You

shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind.” Then he turns to Leviticus chapter 19, verse 18, and states, “And, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And so Jesus says to him, “You have answered absolutely correctly, perfect. Do that and you will live.” But then the lawyer asks Jesus, “And just who is my neighbor?” Because the lawyer knows Jesus means all people are his neighbors, but he tries to wiggle his way out of the conditions Jesus has just put on him by reading that bylaw and adhering to the letter of the Jewish law, rather than the spirit of the law as Jesus wants it to be applied. You see, that verse in Leviticus actually reads, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” “Your own people” is the key phrase here. For the law, as it was written, is just referring to the Jewish people. Like I said, the lawyer is trying to test Jesus. He's effectively asking Jesus, “Doesn't that mean we should just love our own people, those just like us?” And rather than argue with him, Jesus tells him today's marvelous parable.

Now just to quickly provide some background – at the time, Jews and Samaritans had a longstanding and immense contempt for one another. They weren't neighbors. It might be comparable to the animosity some people today feel toward black people, or gay people, or Muslims, just to name a few. So Jesus tells the lawyer a story about a Jewish man who was on a journey down from Jerusalem to Jericho, about 17 miles, and robbers attacked him, beat him and left him half dead. Now I was on that road when I visited Israel some years ago. Even though we traveled on a modern highway, it was kind of creepy. Lots of rocky, barren hills, deserts with nomadic Bedouin tribes traveling on camels, living in tents. I can just imagine what it was like back then. So first a Jewish priest, and then another Jewish religious man, a temple assistant, come down the road. Both see the injured man lying there, but both pass him by on the other side, refusing to help. Finally, surprise, a hated Samaritan comes down the road, and this Samaritan stops and helps the injured Jewish man, bandages his wounds, brings him to an inn, a place of safety, and even pays for his care. Jesus then asked the lawyer, “Which of these three do you think is a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” And the lawyer responded, “The one who showed him mercy.” Obviously, Jesus has just shot holes in “what was written in the law.” And then Jesus told him, “Go and do the same.” It's amazing how Jesus could use so few words to reveal such a divine truth about how to love all our neighbors: “Show mercy; go and do the same,” to people of color, to the stranger, to the homeless, to the undocumented, or... I don't have to go on...you know who they are by the way you might feel right now. You see, sometimes what's written in the law, really needs to be supplanted by what should be written on your heart. And the key lesson from today's parable is this: it's impossible to love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your

strength and all your mind, and not love all your neighbors. It's impossible to love God, and not love others as you love yourself. Can I have an "Amen!"

Now obviously this parable is a somewhat challenging lesson for us on how we are to love our neighbor. But, this parable also offers us more. A wonderful alternative lesson. And what is that? Well, it's also a metaphor for our very own lives – our own fall and redemption! The story starts with a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Now Jerusalem, in the Bible, was not only a real place, but it also represented the holy city of God, heaven. Jericho, on the other hand, represents the world. It was cursed in the Bible as a city of sin. And here's this man, or this woman, traveling down... down... down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, where he is pummeled and beaten, and ends up laying helpless in a ditch beside the road. Now think for a minute of your own life and how many times you've felt yourself down and out, pummeled and helpless. Because of sin, addiction, mistakes you've made, choices you regret. Or because of trials and troubles you have no control over – illness, death, the actions or decisions of others. Perhaps you're suffering with an issue right now – something that's weighing on you. I'm struggling with grief over the loss of my Dad. You see, when we think of those difficult times in our lives that bring us down, can't we empathize with that man lying helpless on the side of the road. I think we can, because brothers and sisters, you and I are that person. But thanks be to God for what happens next. For we too, have a rescuer, a lowly outsider, who has come to save us, to stoop down and pick us up. To be our bridge over troubled waters. Who? Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Yes, he is the one who can heal our wounds, who can forgive our sins, who can dry our tears, who can bring us that peace that passes all understanding, who can give us hope, who can make a way for us, even when we can't see the way ahead. Yes, Jesus will come, pick us up and show us compassion and mercy and love. And isn't that a comfort to know that the God of all creation has embraced us, and indeed, all of humanity through his son, our Savior. Who will look after us now and into eternity.

In closing I want to leave you with one final thought. In telling the parable, Jesus introduces a subtle little touch. He says, "By chance... by chance a priest came along." I wonder how that happened? How a priest, a temple assistant, and a Samaritan, all happen to be traveling down that lonely, desolate road to Jericho at exactly the same time. Was it by chance? Or, did they come that way by a specific arrangement and in the exact fulfillment of the plan. A plan of God, that God devised. It makes me wonder about the many people, our neighbors, we come across every day 'by chance.' Is it? Maybe instead each and every one of our interactions with others are God planned opportunities for us to do the work of Jesus Christ. Opportunities for us to "go and do the same." Amen.

O Lord, we give you thanks for the lessons of today. We are challenged by this parable of Jesus and what it means to show mercy to our neighbor – to anyone who is in need. By our words and our actions. As Martin Luther King, Jr reminded us: “The first question which the priest and Levite asked was: “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” But the Good Samaritan reversed the question: “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” Yes, Lord, we hurt ourselves when we fail to help others. And so may we see the people around us, the way the Good Samaritan saw the Jewish man, the way you see us. As those who are sometimes hurt, sometimes beaten down, sometimes misguided. We thank you for your amazing grace that forgives us, your mercy that cleanses us, your arms that embrace us, and for your love that picks us up and sets us right. Help us go out and do the same. In Jesus' name, Amen.