

Being Neighbor: The Way of Eternal Life

Luke 10:25-37 *“Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

The parable of the Good Samaritan contains the whole of the gospel, the good news that Jesus brought and embodied. If we had no more scripture than this, it would be all the light and truth we need for living.

A lawyer stands up to challenge Jesus. Whenever we approach religion from a “testing” point of view, it means we do not want to look at our own lives but to measure everyone else’s life. We are picking a fight. The only truth that matters is the truth of our own lives and how we are living them. Everything else is pretty much a waste of time.

“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” What is the deepest meaning of our lives? What happens when we die? Is this life all that we have, or is there something more? It is hard to know what the lawyer meant by eternal life, but his question may be ours, too.

“What does the law tell you?” asks Jesus. Jesus puts it back on the man. He is not going to bite the hook and get lured into an intellectual discussion about religion. Jesus always keeps the focus on our own lives. He wants us to search our own minds and hearts and lives. “Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will open to you.” That is Jesus’ approach.

The lawyer answers with the foremost commandments: You shall love God with your whole being, and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus has gotten him to acknowledge what he already knows. “That is right,” says Jesus. “Now, just do that and you will live.” You know what to do, what is essential. Get your life focused on that, and you will find what you are looking for. You will really live the way we are made to live. And THAT is eternal life.

“But wanting to justify himself,” the lawyer asks who IS my neighbor? Who am I to love, and who don’t I have to love? Let’s talk about distinctions. Let’s divide up reality into good and bad, moral and immoral, righteous and unrighteous, deserving and undeserving, good guys and bad guys. The lawyer is trying to create some wiggle room. Surely there are some folks we don’t have to love. The person who has hurt us or disagrees with our own ideas and beliefs. Those of a different religious tradition or practice—Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, or even Christians who don’t share our point of view. The lawyer is us as we divide up people into those who deserve our love and those who don’t, those who are easy to love and those who are difficult.

Instead of arguing, Jesus tells a story. A man travels a dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho. He is mugged and left half dead. Along come two very religious people, a priest and a Levite. They are involved with the temple and its

worship and functions. They go out of their way to avoid this poor fellow. Maybe they fear that touching him will make them ritually impure. Or maybe they are just in a hurry to get back to the temple, the business of religion. Their religious practice is very important and must not be interrupted or compromised.

Down the road comes a Samaritan, considered by Jews to be a racial half-breed and religious heretic. Here is the bombshell. The very person the original hearers of the story would label as a bad guy, an irreligious scoundrel, or, one we hear a lot today, the secularist, is the one who stops, puts his own life on hold, and deals with the wellbeing of the person in need. In other words, he acts like a human being. He fulfills the greatest of commandments without even being aware of it. He just does it.

Which one, asks Jesus, was neighbor to the man left for dead? The lawyer cannot escape. The one who was compassionate, who treated him as a fellow human being in need. Jesus ends the discussion: Go and do the same thing. Do what you know. That is the way of eternal life.

Eternal life in Jesus' teachings and view does not have to do with "going to heaven." Jesus never talks that way. He talks about the here and the now, about living life the way God made us to live it. When we are living that way, then we are in harmony with life that is without end. When we are loving neighbor as ourselves and loving God with our whole being—the two always go together—then we don't have to worry about what happens when we die. When we obsess about "getting saved and going to heaven" and at the same time engage in judgmentalism, arrogance, violence, and hate, we are in the same place as this lawyer. We know the law but are not LIVING it. We are calling Jesus "Lord, Lord," but are not doing what he asks (Luke 6:46). We are making distinctions, dividing up reality. It is an avoidance of the life to which Jesus calls us.

This parable shows us the potential of religion for making us either healthy and whole, or sick as persons or societies. The priest and Levite are caught in religion without living the truth of religion. Religion is not an end in itself, but only a means to our living as true human beings. History is filled with people made sick with religion and carrying out wars, torture, pogroms, and destroying cultures in order to propagate their religion. As Christians we need to accept our role as a major player in that history. Of course, there are many exceptions. But these days we must be very honest and clear about our own contribution to the violence done in the name of religion, which continues today.

I had two conversations recently that were sparked by our emphasis here on interfaith respect and dialogue. The gist of it was that to some we seem not to be Christian enough. We are not pressing Christianity as superior to other religious faiths and are not verbally putting forth the "cause of Christ." In a culture and a city saturated with Christianity, and with much of that Christianity being experienced by people as oppressive, judgmental, and spiritually violent, I think we here have a

different path. It is the path of Jesus, the servant, who embodied the life that is eternal and calls us to that same way, truth, and life. People have heard quite enough Christianity. What they long to see is the embodiment of our religion. That is what the Church of the Covenant tries to be about—living the life to which Jesus calls us.

The question arises from time to time about Camp Kum Ba Yah. Is it a Christian camp? Well, the camp was started by Christians. Many Christians are involved. But also those who are not Christian. The camp does not function to teach religion, but to give children direct experience with nature, the creation, and with each other across racial and socio-economic boundaries. The camp exists to let children be children, which is their work, not to make them objects of anything, including religion. In other words, we are about trying to live as true human beings. That is eternal life. That is what Jesus was talking about.

The more I work with other religious traditions, the more I see there is a common aim and goal—that we should live as true human beings. It is not about being religious, but being human the way God made us to be. That's where religion can either make us whole or make us sick. When we use religion to divide, to make distinctions, to distance ourselves from others and their needs, we get sick.

Jesus ended by turning the lawyer's question around. The question is not, Who is my neighbor? The right question is, Which one was neighbor to the man in need? The one who acted as a human being, not the religious ones. Neighbor is not something in the other person but in me. The English word "neighbor" comes from words that mean "near" and "dwelling," the one who lives next door, one who is close by. It has to do with nearness. Being neighbor then means living in a way that we are near, not far away, from each other. It means having our lives and hearts open, not distancing ourselves from each other through making distinctions and dividing up people by building walls. As I said to one person who seemed troubled by my view that we as Christians need to learn to listen to those of other religious traditions and practices, we as Christians need to be in relationship with those we want to distance ourselves from and then condemn. Studying Islam is one thing; knowing someone who is Muslim is another. So with Buddhism or Judaism or any other religious tradition. Knowing about poverty is not the same as knowing someone who is poor. The same with those who are gay or lesbian. And with those who are racially different. Also the same with children. It is about relationships, drawing near, not remaining separate and distant. That is being neighbor. That is eternal life.

In the years prior to his untimely death in Bangkok, Thailand, Thomas Merton became very interested in Asian spirituality, particularly Zen Buddhism. He published a book of teachings by the Taoist master Chuang Tzu who lived about 1,500 years ago. Here is one of Chuang Tzu's teachings: *In the age when life on earth was full, no one paid any special attention to worthy people, nor did they*

single out the person of ability. Rulers were simply the highest branches on the tree, and the people were like deer in the woods. They were honest and righteous without realizing that they were “doing their duty.” They loved each other and did not know that this was “love of neighbor.” They deceived no one yet they did not know that they were “people to be trusted.” They lived freely together giving and taking, and did not know that they were generous. For this reason their deeds have not been narrated. They made no history. (THE WAY OF CHUANG TZU, Thomas Merton, 1965)

We need to join with others in this life and work of being human beings. This is the fulfillment of religion. If we get stuck in religion, we become sick. If we see that religion is only the raft that can take us to the shore of our true humanity, then we become whole. We discover and live life in its fullness—eternal life.