

July 11, 2010/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

Being Neighbor: The Way of Eternal Life

Psalm 82

*"Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked."*

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

First, a brief word about the psalm for today. Psalm 82 is a little strange, and calls for some knowledge of its historical setting. It pictures the God of Israel presiding over a council of lesser gods, like the CEO. Since entering the land of Canaan, the people of Israel encountered cultures worshiping other gods. At times, these gods became very appealing, and the people would forget the God who brought them out of Egypt. This psalm asserts the supremacy of God who is beyond all gods, maker of heaven and earth, who requires that we live with justice, compassion, and mercy. In the psalm, God demotes the other gods once and for all because they have not promoted justice, and have shown partiality to the powerful and self-serving. This all may seem a little strange to us, until we ask: Aren't there other gods around these days that we serve, values and systems and ideologies that we seldom question, that perpetuate suffering and injustice? What about the god we call "the economy," for instance? Everything must be good for "the economy," regardless of the ways our economic system exploits and brutalizes people's lives and the environment. I encourage you to read the essays of Wendell Berry, Kentucky farmer and writer, to hear the voice of reason, compassion, and justice when it comes to how our economic structure continues destroying people and the land.

The core of Psalm 82 is God's call for justice for those most in need and without an advocate, and judgment upon the wicked who perpetuate suffering. The psalm ends with a clear and profound prayer: Judge the earth, O God, because ALL of the nations belong to you. There is no "God Bless OUR Nation" here. God blesses and judges all nations, ours included.

The psalm is a good backdrop for the parable of the Good Samaritan.

A lawyer stands up to "test" Jesus. When we "test" someone, it means we are measuring someone else's life, not our own. What matters most is the truth of our own lives and how we are living them. Everything else is pretty much a waste of time and a distraction. The lawyer wants to examine Jesus, not himself. Jesus turns the tables on him.

"Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" How can I touch the deepest meaning of life? Is this life all that I have, or is there something more? It is hard to know what the lawyer meant by eternal life. Since his question is a "test," we don't know whether he is sincerely interested in an answer or not. Still, maybe his question is ours, as well. It is about the ultimate meaning of our lives.

"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 debate about religion. Jesus always keeps the focus on our own lives and what we are doing with them. He wants us to search our own minds and hearts. "Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will open to you." That is Jesus' approach. Find out for yourself, in your own life and experience.

The lawyer answers with the foremost commandments: You shall love God with your whole being, and love your neighbor as yourself. He already knows the answer to his own question. "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, life now and forever.

Now you can feel a hesitation. The man is not satisfied. "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, friends and enemies. 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 ideas and beliefs. Those of different religious traditions. The lawyer is us as we assess who does or does not fall within the orbit of our love.

Jesus doesn't argue. He tells a story. A man travels a dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho. He is mugged and left for dead. Along come two very religious people, a priest and a Levite. They go out of their way to avoid the fellow. If he is already dead, touching him might make them ritually impure. Or maybe they are just in a hurry to get back to the temple and the business of religion.

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 see as a bad guy 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. It seems as natural to him as breathing.

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

Eternal life in Jesus' teachings is not about "going to heaven." Jesus never talks that way. He talks about living the way God made us to live here and now. When we are on that path, we are in harmony with life that is without end. When we are loving neighbor as ourselves and loving God with our whole being, 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 call Jesus "Lord, Lord," but do not do what he asks (Luke 6:46). We are justifying ourselves, making distinctions, dividing up reality, avoiding the life to which Jesus calls us.

The 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 so that they cannot respond as human beings. Religion is not an end in itself, but a means to our living out our true humanity. Anthony De Mello tells a story of Nasruddin, who is a kind of wise fool in the Sufi tradition. [*The Song of the Bird*, De Mello] Nasruddin was taking a load of salt to market on his donkey. The donkey had to wade through a river, which dissolved the salt. When the donkey reached the other bank, the animal ran around in circles, delighted to be free of its load. Nasruddin was irritated. So, next market day, Nasrudden packed cotton all around the salt. The donkey nearly drowned as the river water soaked the cotton. "There!" said Nasruddin. "That will teach you to think that each time you go through water you stand to gain!" De Mello adds this comment: Two persons walked into religion. One came out alive, the other drowned. I would like to say, walking into religion can either bring us to our true humanity, or we can get stuck in it and drown.

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.

Notice how Jesus turned the lawyer's question around. Not, Who is my neighbor? But, Which one was neighbor to the man in need? The one who acted as a human being, not as a "religious" person. Neighbor is not something in the other person but in me. The question then is not, Who is or is not my neighbor? The question is, What does it mean for me to BE neighbor? The English word "neighbor" comes from words that mean "near" and "dwelling," the one who lives 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. It is about relationships, drawing near, not remaining separate and distant. That is being neighbor. That is eternal life.

When I think about these things, that the purpose of our spiritual practice is to help us be more fully human, it takes some of the excitement and drama out of it! Sometimes we want religion to be exciting and dramatic, other-worldly and esoteric. Maybe we think that spirituality is to make us something "special". But what could be more wondrous and joyful, more fulfilling and ultimately comforting than to be on the journey of touching and growing in our true humanity? Maybe the lawyer was looking for something "special," some spiritual secret Jesus might impart that would make him different and set him apart from ordinary folks. What Jesus led him to was the essential truth of his own spiritual tradition -- love God with your whole being, and love your neighbor as yourself. That is what it means to be a true human being. That is the life you are really looking for. It is "nothing special".

With that in mind, one final story. 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)

As we follow the inward and outward journeys of our spiritual life, growing in our understanding of loving God and neighbor as ourself, and being neighbor in the ways we feel God is calling us to serve and love, I think we will grow in our sense of being part of life that is eternal, that is both now and forever.