

July 14, 2013 / 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 may seem to us a little strange, and calls for some awareness of its cultural setting. It pictures the God of Israel presiding like a CEO over a council of lesser gods. 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 the one God, maker of heaven and earth, who requires that human beings live in justice, compassion, and peace. In the psalm, God demotes the other gods to mortal status because they have not promoted justice, but have shown partiality to the powerful and self-serving. All of this may seem strange to us, until we ask: Aren't there other gods around these days, values and systems and ideologies that, because we serve them, perpetuate suffering and injustice? The god of wealth. The god of power. The god of self-interest instead of concern for the interests of all. Once you start naming the lesser gods of our day, you begin to see them everywhere.

The core of Psalm 82 is the one true God, creator of the universe, who calls for justice and compassion for those most in need and without an advocate, and condemns those who perpetuate suffering. The psalm ends with a 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. For Jesus stands in the spiritual tradition that is deeply aware of God as the power of life itself, moving always in the directions of justice, peace, compassion, and concern for those in need.

A lawyer stands up to "test" Jesus. To "test" someone means to measure someone else's life, not our own. What matters most is the truth of our own lives and how we are living them. The lawyer wants to examine Jesus, not himself. Jesus turns the tables.

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

"What does the law tell you?" asks Jesus. Jesus puts it back on the man, who is an expert on Israel's laws. Jesus not going to bite the hook and get lured into a 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. THAT is eternal life, life now and forever.

Now you can sense a hesitation. "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 we don't have to love, don't have to be concerned about. The person who has hurt us or disagrees with our ideas and beliefs. Those of different religious traditions. Those who are poor. Those who are mentally ill. Those whose sexual orientation is different from ours. The Muslim. The atheist. The "fundamentalist" Christian. We are in the lawyer's place when we assess who does or does not fall within the orbit of our love. These are all things that have to do with the other person, with what or who is outside of us. Jesus is more interested in what is inside us, what in us restricts and hampers our loving, our compassion.

Jesus does what the best spiritual teachers do. He tells a story. A man travels a road from Jerusalem to Jericho known for its dangers. 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 would make them ritually impure. Or maybe they are just in a hurry to get back to the temple and the business of religion, perpetuating the institution.

Down the road comes a Samaritan, considered by Jews to be a racial half-breed and

religious heretic. He is a foreigner, perhaps a resident alien, an immigrant, in Jewish territory. Here is the bombshell. The original hearers of the story would see the Samaritan as the bad guy. Yet, he is the one who stops, puts his own life on hold, and deals with the well-being of the person in need, doing whatever it takes. In other words, he acts like a true human being. He fulfills the heart of the law 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 responded as a true human being. Jesus ends the discussion: Go and do the same thing. That is the way of eternal life. It is putting into practice, embodying love of God, and love of our neighbor who, like us, is a child of God. That's a pretty good program for life, isn't it? Loving God, others, ourselves. Always learning what it means, and then doing it.

Eternal life in Jesus' teachings is never 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, indifference, 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 lawyer began by asking Jesus, Who is my neighbor? Jesus turned the question around. Which one was neighbor to the man in need? Do you see the radical difference? 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 filled with distinctions, judgments, and divisions we create within our own minds and hearts. Our inward journey spiritual work is in great part to see with honesty, clarity, and humility the often subtle ways we distance ourselves from others and their needs. Our fears. Our insecurities. Our hurts. Our desire that others serve us and our needs, and where that desire comes from. When those judgments, divisions, hostilities, fears...when those dividing walls come down in us, then we find in ourselves the quality Jesus talked about as "being neighbor".

Then we are truly present with and open to whoever is in need, the person right next to us right here in our community, or the persons in need in our city, nation, or world. That is being neighbor. That is eternal life. Neighbor is a quality of my own being, so that I am truly open to whoever I encounter, near or far away.

The purpose of our spiritual practice is to help us be more fully human, find our true humanity. Sometimes we want religion and spirituality 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".

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 and practice of loving God and neighbor as ourselves, and being neighbor in the ways we feel God is calling us to serve, we will grow in our sense of being part of life that is eternal, that is both now and forever. We know the way to eternal life. All we need is to do it.