

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/8/2015, The Third Sunday in Lent
Psalm 19, John 2:13-22, Luke 10:30-37
Revive the Soul

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text this morning is a line from our Psalm — Psalm 19. The Psalmist praises the holy law of God with these words:

The law of the LORD is perfect and *revives the soul* ...

Of course, the law of the Lord often *constrains* us, ruling out unworthy paths for us, shepherding us away from sin, and causing us to walk in the narrow way. But Psalm 19 tells the other side of the story — the happy side. The law of the Lord both constrains us and revives us. Indeed, the law of the Lord constrains and disciplines us *so that* we might flourish. We don't have a whole lot of years in this earthly life of ours. Threescore and ten years, the Bible says, maybe fourscore years: seventy or eighty years. Psalm 19 would urge us to use the years left to us as best we can. Psalm 19 would urge us to live as fully as we can in the time granted to us. The interesting idea before us is that living "as fully as we can" means that we must learn self-discipline. We must learn to walk as Jesus walked, in his holy ways. We cannot forever be gadding about, indulging temptations, experimenting with sin, yielding to bad habits, surrendering to anger and greed and lust, scattering our time and resources in a thousand different directions. No, Psalm 19 would have to understand that flourishing means focusing more and more on the path of love, imitating the ways of our Lord Jesus.

Earlier this week, my wife, Carol, asked me what I was going to be preaching about today. I answered as I always answer: "Jesus. I'm gonna preach about Jesus." She answered, "Yes, but what about Jesus *in particular* are you going to say?" I told her that I meant to preach about the Good Samaritan. She objected: "But the Gospel Lesson is not about the Good Samaritan, but about the Cleansing of the Temple." And of course, she is right. In today's Gospel story we see the passion of our Lord for the First Commandment. He does not want the Temple nor the Church to be so focused on merchandising that it forgets about worship and prayer. It is a remarkable sight: to imagine Jesus making a whip and driving the merchants out, overturning the tables and so on. It is a picture of righteous indignation we should not forget.

But in this sermon I want to focus on the positive reason for walking in the ways of God's holy law. I do not want to speak so much about the whip, but rather the reviving. And so we come to my text:

The law of the LORD is perfect and *revives the soul* ...

THE REVIVING OF THE POOR, BEATEN MAN

When we look at the story of the Good Samaritan, we can see some reviving going on. First off, and most obviously, there is the poor crime victim. The man is half dead:

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead...” (Luke 10:30, RSV)

Sometimes when a man is beaten, he can rest there on the ground for a while, gather together again his strength, stand up and shake his fist and shout curses at the thugs off in the distance who have hurt him. Not this fellow. He has been so beaten that he cannot get up. The Good Samaritan has to haul him up onto his beast — a donkey, perhaps. There is no question of the man walking alongside the Good Samaritan. If he is going to make it to the inn, he must be borne there.

He has wounds. They need to be soothed with oil and disinfected with wine and bandaged. This broken man never says a word in the story. It is as if he has been left too weak even for speech. Well, the text tells us that he was left “half dead.” And you get the impression about the man that if the Good Samaritan does not help him, he is soon not going to be half dead, but the whole thing. He is going to be entirely dead.

But we have every reason to think that this poor man makes it. He has a chance to regain his health, make his way home to his wife and family who are probably worried sick wondering where he is. He has a chance to pick up and start again, all because of the Good Samaritan’s compassion. This kind man brings the broken man to the inn and arranges for his care:

And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, “Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.” (Luke 10:35, RSV)

Two denarii. That’s two days’ pay. It’s like the Good Samaritan works two days for this stranger, without being paid and without asking to be paid. But by doing this, the Good Samaritan gave the poor man a chance to live. He gave him a chance to revive.

And that is what the holy law of God does:

The law of the LORD is perfect and *revives the soul* ...

This poor man is a living illustration of our text. The Good Samaritan obeyed the very heart of God's holy law, and in doing so, he revived the soul of the broken man.

HEART OF GOD'S LAW

And what is the "very heart of God's holy law"? It is love, sweet love.

In our Monday Evening Bible Study, we recently took a look at Mark 12. It includes a respectful conversation between Jesus and a scribe. The scribe asks Jesus about the chief commandment:

And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, Which is the first commandment of all?
(Mark 12:28, KJV)

And Jesus answers in terms of love. We are to love God and we are to love our neighbors. Everywhere we turn, we are to practice love:

³⁰And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. ³¹And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these. (Mark 12:30-31, KJV)

Now, my friends, I must give you a word of warning about this saying of our Lord Jesus. When Jesus summarizes the commandments in these two — the commandments of love — he does not mean thereby to dismiss the other Ten Commandments. It is crucial that we maintain the commandments against murder, adultery, theft, and so on because those commandments help teach us the *content* of love. Without the holy law of God, we are liable to get "love" wrong. Love is not the same as affirmation of things as they are. It is more along the lines of transformation in the direction of Christ.

On the other hand, we will never really understand the holy law of God until we understand that the heart of divine law is love. The universe and the universe's Maker are waiting for us and calling to us to practice love more and more. And that is what the Good Samaritan did. He practiced love and thereby revived the soul of the poor man beaten half-dead.

REVIVING THE SOUL OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

But there was some more reviving going on in this story than this. It was not just that the poor beaten man was revived. So was the soul of the Good Samaritan himself.

In Van Gogh's painting of the Good Samaritan, which we have on the front of our worship folder, you can just barely see the priest and the Levite farther on down the road. It is not a broad road. It is more like a mountain path. Surely they noticed the half-dead man lying on the road. They had to almost step over him, or pass on the other side of the road to avoid him. And I bet we can excuse those two ecclesiastical fellows. They had important work to tend to. They were tired and anxious to get home to their families. They did not want to fall victim to the same robbers, like first responders being done in by terrorists. So, they go their way. God bless 'em. But the thing is, in going their own way, they have reduced themselves a little bit. In Van Gogh's painting, they walk fairly upright, but if we were closer to them, perhaps we would find that their shoulders are sunk a little and their heads bent down a bit.

As for the Good Samaritan, maybe he doesn't even think much about what he has done. Maybe he simply does his good deed, and then heads on his way, not even thinking of mentioning it to his family when he gets home. So perhaps he doesn't pay what he has done very much mind. Nonetheless, in him we see humanity at its height. In him we see a soul that is revived—soul that is living strong and free.

The law of the LORD is perfect and *revives the soul* ...

A LOT OF MISERY IN THIS WORLD

There is a lot of misery in this world that is not the fault of those who suffer. They are not to blame. They suffer innocently. They might work hard at their jobs, for example, but they are lowly jobs, and so they go their whole lives without many opportunities. In olden days and in some parts of the world to this day, they are coalminers, for example, heading down into the belly of the earth, breathing in the black death, earning little money in the process.

Or they suffer innocently because of ill health or poor educations or friends or spouses who were untrue to them, or their timing was just wrong and the good opportunities went to other folks.

So, they are down and out. They could use the help of others. At least they could use a friendly word now and then.

Last Sunday we received the news during the liturgy that our member Jon Tota had collapsed. He was like the poor man in the story of the Good Samaritan. Jon was out running. He was training for a half-marathon. Young, fit, with a beautiful family and every reason to live, and suddenly he fell down on the ground. Something terrible had happened. Now, he is much better. Yesterday, when I visited him at the hospital, it was like night and day. When I walked into the room, he almost leaped from bed and hugged me. It was like the same old Jon Tota again. But a week ago, Jon was in need of some Good Samaritans in his life. And glad to say, they were there. They gathered him up, began immediate medical care, rushed him off to the hospital.

Life in this world is tough enough without priests and Levites and everyone else stepping over the poor, broken man and moving on. We need some reviving in this world. We have neighbors, friends, and relatives who are either down and out or heading that way. We need more and more obedience to God's holy law, for that will be good for our neighbors and for ourselves.

In the end, this world is in the hands of the greatest of all Good Samaritans. It was as if all of humanity lay there broken and helpless on the road, and Jesus came along and saved us. And the gap between him and us was much greater than the gap between the Good Samaritan and the poor Jew lying on the road. The gap between the holiness of Jesus and our sin was wide — ten thousands miles wide — and yet Jesus saved us. He smoothed and bandaged our wounds. Though it cost him his very body and blood, he poured them out for us so that we could revive. Always that is the good effect of God's holy ways: that there should be some reviving and rising up again on this earth.

So, let us join in the flow of reality. Let us seek lives of love and holiness. Let us join the pattern of the true Good Samaritan, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.