

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
7/10/2016, the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 15
Luke 10:25-37, The Good Samaritan

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

My opening text is our Lord's answer to the lawyer about eternal life. The lawyer had said that we must love — love God and love our neighbor — that we might have eternal life. Jesus gives this reply:

²⁸And [Jesus] said to him, "You have answered right; do this, and you will *live*." (Luke 10:28, RSV)

What a sweet word: live. "Do this, and you will *live*." I want to live, and I want you to live too, my friends.

The issue at stake in this morning's Gospel reading is not really about the way of *life*. That way is love – both to love God with all of our heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves. "Do this," Jesus says, "and you will *live*." All sides in this morning's Gospel reading agree on that, and it is an important matter. Love and life belong together. That we should not live in vain, we must be people of love. To not squander our lives and eternity, we must turn to love with even more earnestness. Both the lawyer who examines Jesus and Jesus himself agree on the necessity of love. So, the issue is not love, but rather the neighbor. Jesus and the lawyer have different notions of who deserves our love. At least, at the start of things they have different notions. By the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan, the lawyer seems, grudgingly, to agree with Jesus in a generous notion of the neighbor.

Neighbors are not simply the people nearby. Here in the city we have lots of people nearby. They live in apartments next door or down the hall. We walk up the stairs with them or ride the elevator with them. We might nod our heads to them, discuss the weather with them, discuss sports with them, but we might not yet be neighbors to them in the sense that the Good Samaritan was neighbor to the poor man on the road. That takes heart. That takes will. Being a neighbor to someone is not a matter of physical proximity, but is more a matter of the spirit. To be a neighbor to someone means that you take the welfare of that person to heart. He might be a stranger to you, she might be unknown to you, but you prove yourself a neighbor to that one when you step forward in sympathy and in the desire to help.

That's what the Good Samaritan does. He *is* a good neighbor to the beaten man because he *makes himself* to be a good neighbor. We can walk the sidewalks of our town with headphones on, we can sit on the bus and read our email, we can sit or stand beside various people on the subway, we can

buy our lunch from the person at the counter, we can be law-abiding citizens, courteous people, and all that, but we do not become a *neighbor* until we rather step forward toward someone and try to help. My colleague in the Gospel story – the priest – walks on by. The learned Levite walks on by. But the Good Samaritan walks *toward* the beaten man with the desire to help, and in that way, he enters into an elevated category in life: he becomes a neighbor. He does not love in abstraction – lots of people can do that. Rather, he loves his neighbor. He has made himself a neighbor to the one in need.

Just last Sunday, in our Epistle Lesson from Galatians 6, St. Paul encouraged Christians to persevere in the path of love. The Revised Standard Version of that text cautions us against becoming “weary in well-doing.” And so St. Paul writes this:

And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart. (Galatians 6:9 RSV)

But then the apostle adds a special emphasis: he especially asks that Christians not let brother and sister Christians suffer need. He puts the point this way:

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. (Galatians 6:10, RSV)

One way to express the point of the parable of the Good Samaritan is that it is lifting up that little word apostolic word “all.” As we have opportunity, let us do good to *all* people. If the Good Samaritan had restricted his help to his “household of faith,” then he would have walked right on by the poor man, for Samaritans and Jews heartily ignored each other. But what makes this Good Samaritan good is precisely that he has a generous notion of the neighbor. He does not confine the word to those who are of his household of faith. Rather, the whole world could be his neighbor. The great qualification for his help is simply that another human being suffers.

One of the old preachers imagined the conversation between the innkeeper and the Good Samaritan:

“Is he a brother of yours?” “No, I never saw him before.”
“Well, are you at all under obligation to him?” “No!-yes, yes, I feel under obligation to everybody that is a man [a human being].¹

¹ Spurgeon, “The Good Samaritan,” 1877, on behalf of the hospitals of London.

Earlier this week, I mentioned to Carol in an email that I had just put on some coffee and was about to eat some of my birthday cake: chocolate cake with peanut butter icing. She asked me whether I was sharing some of my cake with others here in the office. I answered, "No, No way!" She wrote back, "Some kind of Good Samaritan you are!" To which I could only answer, "Oh, you are right. Bummer." I conclude that there are probably more opportunities in this world to be a Good Samaritan than we notice – in both big and little ways. We do not need to be rich or strong in order to lend a hand to others in need. Even the poor and the weak can probably share something to help others along in this world.

If the beaten man should die, then those who depend on him are thereby harmed and left in grief. And the good that he would have done, shall not be done, at least not by him. But this poor man does not die, because the Good Samaritan ministers to him. And the good that this poor man might have done, he now has a chance to do, for he still lives, thanks to the ministry of the Good Samaritan.

This beloved parable is the story version of a beloved Bible verse – John 3:16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16, RSV)

Almighty God, Maker of heaven and earth, is far more *unlike* you and me than the Samaritan was unlike the poor Jew. The Samaritan and the Jew were both human beings, in some measure good people, and in some measure bad. But our God is wholly good. Even the best of us are fall below his holiness and goodness. Yet our God does not stand aloof from us in our misery. He does not pass by or simply gaze at us as our life, our years, our opportunities drain away. Our sin has exposed us to death, like huge wounds in our bodies. If someone does not help, we will die. Glad to say, the most wonderful, and the most perfect of Good Samaritans has come to our aid. For God so loved the *world*, that he gave his only Son to die for us.

This goes beyond the goodness of the Good Samaritan. That good fellow did not die in the course of his good deed. His mercy did not come at the price of his own life. But the mercy of Jesus did cost him his life.

Our God became for us our good Neighbor. And now, he turns to us and says, "Go, thou, and do likewise."

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke of being like God:

Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. (Matthew 5:48, KJV)

It is a noble calling – an extraordinary calling. And if we should wonder what is involved in such a calling, today's parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us something important about a good and perfect human life: it is one that is willing to be neighborly. The life of a moral atom is not the right life for us. The ways of indifference are not the right ways for us. Jesus has paid a tremendous cost in order to settle something for you, for me: he has settled the matter of eternity. We need not worry about it in a selfish way, for the outcome of our life is safe in his loving hands. Do you not *want* to be a better person? Do you know desire to come closer to living a more godly life? Then let us go for it! We cannot lose in the end. Let us not leave the Good Samaritan lonely in his manner of life, but join in with him. Indeed, let us join the true Good Samaritan in his life of love, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

(a few extra thoughts, next page)

The Good Samaritan Window in the Wartburg Chapel, where Carol is Pastor
A passing discussion of the allegorical interpretation of the parable:

The beaten man is humanity, on his way down from Jerusalem (our original state of innocence), assaulted and diminished by sin, not really rescued by the Law and the Prophets, saved by Christ, entrusted to the Church (the inn), with Christ promising to come again. In this window, the Good Samaritan is dressed in the same clothes as Jesus in the other windows expressing the ancient interpretation that the true Good Samaritan is Jesus.

