

First Trinity Lutheran Church
July 14, 2007
Luke 10: 25-37

“Go and Do Likewise”

You may remember the Beatles, back in the 60's singing "All you need is Love." There's no doubt that there was a great truth carried in those simple lyrics. If we were to look around the world today, it's clear that a good dose of love would cure many of the world's ills. But it's easier said than done isn't it? I mean we have no problem loving those who are close to us, our family and friends, but what about those who are different from us? What about those who are our enemies? That gets a bit harder, doesn't it? In fact it goes against normal human nature. When someone does something to us, the natural human response is to want to get even. This was shown very clearly in the response to Sept 11. For example people in Australia were hardly affected in any direct way by the attack on the World Trade Center and here in Washington DC, however according to a newspaper story I read Muslims in Australia had been spat at, assaulted, harassed and threatened. Gasoline bombs had been thrown at Mosques and community centers. In Melbourne there was an incident where two girls were thrown off a tram because they were wearing the traditional Muslim burka. It seems that hatred is much easier to generate than is love.

You see, things weren't that much different in Jesus day to the way they are today. The only difference was that instead of the major divide being Christian/Muslim or Protestant/Catholic, it was Jew/Gentile or Jew/Samaritan. For the Jew of Jesus' day, the Samaritans were a despised people. That's because their religion was a sort of merger between Judaism and the pagan religions of a variety of countries from which the inhabitants had been brought by the Assyrians 6 or 700 years before. And even though they claimed to worship according to the traditions of the Patriarchs, they didn't do it in Jerusalem. They'd set up an alternative temple in Samaria. So the Jews would have nothing at all to do with Samaritans, and it would seem the feeling was mutual. So that's the context in which Jesus speaks.

But of course that's just background information. What this parable is really about is the nature of love. The account, though, begins with an expert in the law posing the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It sounds like a genuine question on the surface. Like any good teacher Jesus turns the question back on the questioner. He asks, "What does the Bible say? What does your reading of the law tell you?" Well, the lawyer knows his stuff, and he quickly replies with the orthodox response, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus applauds his answer. In fact Jesus says that he's found the secret to eternal life. "Do this and you will live," Jesus says.

After reading this story a few times one gets the feeling that this lawyer knew the answer before he asked the question. How often do we ask this sort of question, not because we want to know the answer, but because if we keep asking it, it puts off the day when we have to do something about it. This was one of the problems with the Pharisees of Jesus' day. They'd debate the meaning of the law till the cows came home. They'd narrow down the interpretations of various laws until they had it all neatly defined to the nth degree. Jesus regularly criticized them for their concentration on fine detail and ignoring the more important requirement obedience to God. And that's what this man seems to be doing here. What he wants is a nice safe intellectual debate with Jesus about the meaning of life, so he can score a few points before he goes home. But that is not what he gets. Jesus' response, you see, comes not from a desire to convince him intellectually, but from a pastoral response to see his life changed. He says, simply, "Do this and you will live." "Stop debating and start practicing."

Well, clearly that isn't good enough for this lawyer. He doesn't want to be told how to live. And he certainly doesn't want to look stupid in front of his peers, so, we're told, he seeks to justify himself. He understands the implication of Jesus' short statement to go and do it. But

rather than doing he like any good lawyer want to continue to debate the issue so he seeks to justify himself by asking for further clarification of this simple commandment. It's a time-honored method of delaying action. He says: "And who is my neighbor?" " Jesus has a answer to this questions as well, but this time it comes in the form of a story. He tells the story of a man, a Jewish man, going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, a hazardous journey because of the isolation of the route. It was a notorious place for thieves to attack sole travelers and that's exactly what happens.

Perhaps it might help us to put it into a modern context. Jesus might have told the story of a stock trader who had been caught in the initial explosion of the World Trade Center and who had managed to crawl out onto the street before the building collapsed. He's lying there half dead and an FBI agent comes along. He sees him lying there, but looking up notices that the building is starting to groan as though its about to collapse so he hurries on to get clear. After all he won't do anyone any good if he's dead before he begins his investigation. Then Mayor Giuliani comes by on his way to a meeting with some Government Officials. He too sees the man lying there, but decides someone else can look after him; he has more important things to deal with. Finally, along comes one of the Muslim fundamentalists checking on the results of their terrorist attacks. He sees the man lying there and takes pity on him. He helps him up, he takes him down the road and hails a taxi and takes him to the nearest hospital where he pays for his treatment in advance and promises to return the next week to check on him and cover any further expenses he might have.

It's all wrong isn't it? It just wouldn't happen like that. Yet that's exactly the sort of situation that Jesus describes. And he finishes with the question, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The answer is, "The one who showed him mercy."

Jesus' challenge to the lawyer is go and do it. To a large extent this is meant as a challenge to his self-satisfaction, his self-reliance. In the end eternal life is won only by Jesus Christ. We receive it only by grace through faith in his saving work. But having received that grace the challenge remains, "Go and do likewise." "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." "By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another as I have loved you."

Some years ago a famous experiment was conducted with seminary students. Researchers gathered a group of ministry students in a classroom and told them that each of them had an assignment. Their assignment was to record a talk about the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The thing was, the recordings were going to be done in a building on the other side of the campus, and because of a tight schedule, and they needed to hurry to that building. Unbeknownst to the students, on the path to the other building the researchers had planted an actor to play the part of a man in distress, slumped in an alley, coughing and suffering. The students were going to make a presentation about the Good Samaritan. But what would happen, the researchers wondered, when they actually encountered a man in need? Would they be Good Samaritans? Well, no, as a matter of fact, they were not. Almost all of them rushed past the hurting man. One student even stepped over the man's body as he hurried to teach about the Parable of the Good Samaritan!

We should not look down at these seminary students who couldn't put the Parable of the Good Samaritan into practice, because neither can we. Simply knowing in our minds what the right thing to do is does not mean we can do it. If we are going to be Good Samaritans, then this will mean more than a change of mind. It will take a change of heart. And that's what this parable is about: a change of heart.

This is the point of Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan. What the lawyer discovered- and what we discover, too-is that we cannot stand on the sidelines and figure out how to be

good, defining the terms, is this person my neighbor or not, and figuring out just what we have to do to inherit eternal life. Despite all of our religious virtues and attitudes, we just cannot do it. We are helpless to be Good Samaritans on our own strength. In other words, we are the person in the ditch, the one who lies helpless and wounded beside the road, the one who needs to be rescued. And along comes a Good Samaritan, a Good Samaritan named Jesus, who comes to save us, speaks tenderly to us, lifts us into his arms, and takes us to the place of healing. As Paul said, while we were still God's enemies, God saw us in the ditch and had compassion, and in Jesus came to save us.

So, the question is not who is my neighbor? The question is who has been neighbor to you. Jesus Christ has been neighbor to you. The crucified one has been neighbor to you. Have you felt his mercy make your own heart merciful? If so, then you don't need any further explanations, definitions, or clarifications. You will know what it means to "Go and do likewise." AMEN