

**Luke 10:25-42** <sup>25</sup> A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to gain eternal life?”

(A legal expert, is an expert in the Torah, the religious law of the Jews in Jesus’ day. He’d be more like a Biblical scholar than what we think of as a lawyer. The lawyer knows this stuff, inside and out. Don’t you get the sense that he already knows the answer to his own question? He’s an expert for goodness sake. So, Jesus turns the tables.)

<sup>26</sup> Jesus replied, “What is written in the Law? How do **you** interpret it?”

<sup>27</sup> He [the legal expert] responded, “*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.*” The lawyer quotes Torah perfectly!

<sup>28</sup> Jesus said to him, “You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.” (DO this. Don’t just understand this as a concept. Do this. Live this.)

<sup>29</sup> But the legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (*another version says, he wanted to **justify** himself.*) It’s interesting that the lawyer pushes this point because Jesus has **agreed** with him. It seems that, as we guessed, the lawyer’s motives may not be to **learn** from Jesus. It seems he has another agenda. He may want to ‘justify’ his own **actions** (as we often do). He may be engaging in what’s called **Confirmation bias**. The definition of Confirmation bias is **the very human, common** tendency to “search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms our preexisting beliefs while also giving less consideration to alternative possibilities.” In other words, no matter how much proof we see to the contrary we tend to believe what we want to believe and no amount of “proof” or evidence is going to change that! In fact, newer research shows that given data disproving our beliefs we just dig our heels in all the more!

Or maybe the lawyer just felt overwhelmed by the demand of the law. How can we possibly love ALL our neighbors as ourselves? Narrowing that down a bit is only reasonable. Maybe a checklist would help. The Torah already named who the faithful were required to care for: the widow, the orphan, the stranger in your midst and the alien. Now the lawyer wants it nailed down – How do I know **who I have** to help, who I **have to** care about? So Jesus tells him a story:

<sup>30</sup> Jesus replied, “A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. (The road to Jericho is known to be dangerous with lots of places for bad people to hide and wait to ambush. So, maybe the man who was attacked brought this whole disaster upon himself. Maybe he made some bad choices. In fact, maybe he wasn’t so innocent. MAYBE, this was all an illegal deal that went sour! ... Or maybe that’s more ‘trying to justify ourselves’ thinking. Maybe blaming the victim is born out of fear of getting involved; maybe it’s another way to justify fear of getting involved in a messy situation.)

(We continue) He encountered thieves, who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death. <sup>31</sup> Now it just so happened that a priest was also going down the same road. When he saw the injured man, he crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. (We don’t know why the priest is here but surely we can’t blame him for avoiding the situation. Thieves could still be lurking around. The priest was probably busy; an important person with people waiting for him. Touching this man may even make him unclean according to religious guidelines which would prevent him from doing his job. Can’t we sympathize with that feeling

of being torn by our responsibilities and the needs of others? There were people counting on the priest, they may even pay his salary. How can he risk all that to help a stranger who should never have been there in the first place?)

<sup>32</sup> Likewise, a Levite came by that spot, saw the injured man, and crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. (Levites also were from the priestly tribe and served in the temple so we can surely relate to his motivation to remain pure for his Godly work. Or maybe his motivation is his reputation. A religious person should be careful of who they associate with. The old saying “If you lie with dogs you’ll get up with fleas” comes to mind.)

<sup>33</sup> A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. (Samaritans were outsiders, neither Jews nor Gentiles. They were considered unclean and were despised. Some even actively worked against Jesus and his mission.)

<sup>34</sup> The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, tending them with oil and wine. Then he placed the wounded man on his **own** donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him. <sup>35</sup> The next day, he took **two full days’ worth of wages** and gave them to the innkeeper. He said, ‘Take care of him, and when I return, I will pay you back for any additional costs.’ (Jesus asks)

<sup>36</sup> What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?” (Notice, Jesus has changed the definition of neighbor from one who **receives** aid to one who **gives** help and kindness; the lawyer wanted ‘neighbor’ to be narrowly defined so he’d know who he **needed** to help. But, Jesus says **YOU** are the neighbor. You are to help everyone you come across who needs help.)

<sup>37</sup> Then the legal expert said, “The one who demonstrated mercy toward him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

The lawyer wanted to know **who he was required** to help. Jesus turns the tables (again) and says being a neighbor isn’t about figuring out who you **have to help**. It’s not a checklist: OK, I have to help orphans and widows, yes! But, outsiders, those who are unclean, no, not on the list! Jesus says, ‘Being neighbor is determined by who **YOU** are! How **YOU** act!’ It doesn’t depend upon whether the person in need of help is worthy or if they’re on the checklist of acceptable people. Interestingly, the word **mercy** used by the legal expert, “The one who demonstrated mercy...” in every other place it’s used (which is 5 times in Luke) describes **God’s** mercy. He’s saying, ‘The one who acted **as mercifully as God** is the one who acts like a true neighbor. The one who shows kindness to whomever is in need, regardless of whether it is inconvenient or makes us uncomfortable or even unclean.’

<sup>38</sup> While Jesus and his disciples were traveling, Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him as a guest. <sup>39</sup> She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his message. <sup>40</sup> By contrast, Martha was preoccupied with getting everything ready for their meal. So Martha came to him and said, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to prepare the table all by myself? Tell her to help me.”

<sup>41</sup> The Lord answered, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. <sup>42</sup> One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won’t be taken away from her.”

Word of God. Word of Life. **Thanks be to God.**

One thing is necessary. *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.”*

Jesus says, “You are the neighbor. Love yourself by loving others. Not just some others. ALL others.” There is no clean and unclean; worthy or unworthy; loveable or unlovable.” When our list of who we’ll love and help leaves some people off, WE are off the list.

I’m going to tell you a story about a man who lives in our town who was much like the man on the road to Jericho. I don’t know his whole story, just a little bit of it. The little bit I know is actually the little bit you already know, as well. But, you may not know that you know this man’s story and he’s worthy of knowing.

Spencer lived on the streets of Aberdeen. I think he was originally from Taholah. He was Native American. Short, long dark hair. Big smile. Big, toothless smile. You probably saw him sleeping in the park by the Log Pavilion or in a doorway on Wishkah. Or you saw him when you slammed on your breaks to avoid hitting him when he wandered into the street, oblivious to any danger.

The Spencer you probably **didn’t** know smiled all the time. He loved his friends on the streets. He watched out for them. He cared about them. He had a mischievous smile. He was one of the first people Steve saw when we first came to Aberdeen. He was one of the first people I met when I took sandwiches under the bridge with Rev. Sarah. I remember the time a year ago or so when he quit drinking. He was really shaky but determined to quit. He’d had a health scare. He knew he had to change. He wanted a prayer so we prayed. The next time I saw him he was drunk.

A few weeks ago Spencer was hit by a car between the police station and the transit center. He was badly hurt; taken to Harborview immediately where they treated him for a few weeks until last week when he died.

I haven’t seen a death notice in the paper. There hasn’t been a funeral that I know of. There may be one wherever his original family is. But, his family here on the streets, at the Under the Bridge sandwich table, in the doorways and alleys and riverfront – that family is mourning.

We are neighbor to Spencer and he is neighbor to us. We are neighbor to Spencer and all the Spencers in our town. We are to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. There is no one more outsider, no one who more perfectly fits Jesus’ description of the man on the side of the road than Spencer and the hundreds like him in Aberdeen.

It is perfectly reasonable for us to see Spencer and not want to touch him or get near him or give him money or pay for a room for the night. He was the hardest of the hard core. He not only had hit bottom, he’d lived there for a good, long time, until it killed him.

It’s natural for us to judge Spencer. He made bad choices. He should have quit drinking a long time ago. But, we don’t know why he was there. We didn’t live his life. We were neighbor to Spencer. Jesus didn’t tell us to get to the bottom of Spencer’s problems. He told us to love him as we love ourselves. He told us we love ourselves as we love him.

**GOD’S MERCY.** This is a hard story; the story of the good Samaritan and Spencer. The law is hard. The law that shows us how far we fall short of what God asks of us is hard. It’s hard because we don’t want to see it. We want to think of ourselves as generous and loving, and we

are. But, we also fall short ALL THE TIME! We try justify our actions, our beliefs so that we feel better.

But, justification is not our job. Loving is our job. Justification is Jesus' job. Wherever there is law in the Bible there is also Gospel/Good news. The good news in this story is just a few verses before where our reading began. It says "Jesus determined to go to Jerusalem." The good news is that Jesus was determined to go to Jerusalem, where he would face persecution, torture and death because ... sin! Because when all we have to do is **love**, we judge, we look for a way out, we procrastinate, we try to justify ourselves.

So Jesus determined to go to Jerusalem. We are beautiful, wondrous creatures made in the image of God but we sin, we are broken, it is deep within us and we can't fix it. But, Jesus did.

That's why Jesus had to die...because, sin. Because we never get this stuff right! Jesus showed us how to live and then Jesus died to put an end to the power of sin. Jesus invited humanity into abundant life but life that's only ours when we give ourselves away for the sake of each other, especially for the sake of the undesirable, the most repugnant, the most difficult to love. And while we work to do that and try to help each other do that better all the time, we never get it entirely right, because... sin. We don't need to give our assent to atonement theories that are just that "theories"! All we know is **Jesus died** and was resurrected by God because that was the only way sin's stranglehold on us would be broken.

The good news is that we are God's dear children. You are God's dear one. I am God's dear one. Spencer was God's dear one. Every person living in our parking lot is God's dear one and every person who blames them for their choices is God's dear one. Every person who thinks they just need to hit bottom so they'll turn their lives over to God is God's dear one.

We are here to love each other, without hesitation, without judgment. And we can't. So we die to ourselves and rise again and again in the waters of baptism. We and our sin have died with Jesus and we are resurrected with him into new life, where we are free to love, to serve each other, to forgive each other and ourselves for all our failures and to try again.

As Lent begins, we are asked to commit to the spiritual practices of prayer, fasting and doing acts of love so that God may work within us so that space is opened within us for God to fill. As we pray and fast and do acts of love, we think of what God asks of us in the book of Isaiah:

share your bread with the hungry; bring the homeless poor into your house,  
covering the naked when you see them, not hiding from your own family.  
Remove the yoke from among you, the finger-pointing, the wicked speech;  
and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted.

Isaiah tells us when we do those things (in the power of the Holy Spirit, cause, for sure we can't do that on our own!) when we do those things we will be called 'Mender of Broken Walls, Restorer of Livable Streets.' May it be so among us! Amen.