

This exchange between the legal expert and Jesus comes immediately after Jesus' crash course in discipleship that we heard about last week. The disciples, all 70 of them, men, women and children must have been witness to this exchange. This was not just Jesus teaching one legal expert how to live. Jesus was teaching all disciples; those in the first century and all of us today because we haven't changed much. The legal expert's question continues to be our question. Like the legal expert, we know what Jesus considers the greatest commandment: *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.*

And like the legal expert, we want to 'prove ourselves right' or justify ourselves; justify all the times we have **not** 'loved our neighbor.' Not because we're bad people. Not because we're evil or selfish or mean. But as we so often say, "it's complicated."

And so Jesus tells a story about 4 people traveling on a deserted and dangerous road. Three of these people, the Levite and the priest and the man in the ditch were most likely Jews. The storyteller was a Jew and the ones listening to the story were Jews, so it makes it sense. So, the man left for dead would have had **every** expectation that those people who were **like** him, probably the same **race**, same **ethnic** group, from the same **country**. They speak the same language and worship in the same way. He would expect that they would stop to help him. But, none of them did. They went out of their way to **avoid** helping him. We can imagine each of them saying, "It's complicated."

But, the 4th person was a Samaritan. In the eyes of the 3 Jews, he was the hated, despised, dirty, lazy 'other'; the one they could all agree was **not worth** their compassion. **That one** stopped to help and helped far beyond anyone's expectation.

We might imagine the story going this way: A member of Amazing Grace went from Aberdeen to Olympia and when he got to the Black Hills he fell among thieves and was stripped and beaten and left for dead. Along came a member of the church council of Amazing Grace who saw him and crossed to the other side of the road. Then a member of the Maintenance Crew of Amazing Grace (or the Altar Guild, or a S.S. teacher...) came by and that one too crossed to the other side of the road to avoid encountering the desperate man.

It's complicated, I'm late for a meeting. It's complicated, I can't get all dirty helping him. I have to look presentable when I get to work. It's complicated. He'll just use the money for drugs. It's complicated. He was probably involved in something illegal. He should have made better choices. It's complicated. I was in a ditch once and I got myself out with no help from anyone. It's complicated.

But, after that, along came a homeless drug addict; or along came a member of Isis; or along came an undocumented immigrant from El Salvador ... and he picked the man up and put him in his car and took him to the hospital and paid for his care for as long as it was needed.

That is the **scandal** of the Good Samaritan – that the person who has compassion and acts on it is the one who had been feared or despised as “the other.” The compassionate one is the one who seemed so different from us that we instinctively understand the reluctance to see him as **worthy** of our trust; even worthy of being seen as human. It’s complicated.

But, Jesus **simply** says, “Go and do likewise.” Go and be like the one you fear, the one you despise.” We want to justify ourselves; we want to put limits on our responsibility, on our love and Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.”

The legal expert asks, “Who is my neighbor?” but the question Jesus **answers** is “To whom will You BE a good neighbor?”

Jesus says, “IT’s not so complicated. You don’t have to worry about anything else. Worry about **you**; your actions; your justifications. It’s not complicated when you realize you are responsible only for loving your neighbor, end of sentence.

This is Jesus preparing the disciples to be sent out as lambs among wolves. Remember, Jesus sent the disciples out with instructions to be vulnerable, to be **dependent** upon the people to whom they are going to share the love of God.

And this is what happens when you do that. You may be walking down a road and you’ll see someone left for dead on the side of the road: naked, beaten, and robbed. Yes, you are vulnerable; yes you have little to offer – you took nothing but the clothes on your back and yet, it’s **not** complicated: love your neighbor.

Because Jesus also told the disciples of the first century and us: ³⁵ I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.’... ‘I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.’

Jesus came to us vulnerable, weak and lowly with nothing, as all babies come into the world and he shared the love of God with everyone. He loved his neighbor: his male and female neighbor, his rich and poor neighbor; his neighbor with status and his neighbor with no status; his old and young neighbor; his able bodied and sick and diseased neighbor. Jesus loved them all not in tangible ways: he fed them, he spent time with them, he healed them all, he listened to them all. He loved them all. He loved us all!

And he was stripped naked, beaten, and left for dead - because he was vulnerable; because he took no weapons; he had no back up plan or safety net. Because it wasn’t complicated – it was simple: God loves you, even though you only want to justify yourself; even though you want to be right; even though you take something simple and make it complicated. God loves you and would let nothing stop him from demonstrating that love, no matter what happened.

Look, I'm just like you. I too want to be right. I want to justify myself: my actions and my inaction. I hate it when people take a complicated situation and oversimplify it. **This** world at this point in history with this reality all around us IS complex; so complex that we would be justified in throwing up our hands and saying, "I'm done. It's a mess. It's too complicated and I don't know what to do. So, let's eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die."

Or as good Protestants we cling to the promise that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works so it will all work out in the sweet by and by. Easy for us to say **when we're not the one in the ditch!**

But, God has told us what is necessary: Do kindness. Love mercy. Walk humbly with our God. And to further clarify what God thinks about our place in the world as people of faith, there are **hundreds** of examples throughout scripture of God's anger at people of faith ignoring the poor, the hungry, the defeated, and vulnerable.

When immigrants live in your land with you, you must not cheat them. ³⁴ Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.-

Leviticus 19:33-34

"But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" **John 3:17**

"Whoever gives to the poor will not want, but he who hides his eyes will get many a curse."
Proverbs 28:27

"For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'
Deuteronomy 15:11

"Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered."
Proverbs 21:13

Time after time God's prophets have spoken saying: as people of faith God holds **you responsible** for making sure that the weakest, the most desperate people among you are cared for. As Martin Luther said, "God doesn't need our good works but our neighbor does!"

Our life of faith is not only about what happens after we die. God's kingdom began with Jesus' life and death and resurrection inaugurating God's reign here and now and continuing into eternity. As Jesus tells the legal expert "Do this and you will live!" Not live in the hereafter. You will live! This is life, abundant and eternal: to love our neighbors. Because, the problems may be complicated but the only solution we need concern ourselves with is simple: love your neighbor. Love this neighbor, here next to you in the pew and this neighbor on the border and the neighbor in Central America threatened by violence through no fault of their own and the neighbor fleeing

wars fought over a resource that is killing the planet; and this neighbor being sold into the sex trade because men of privilege are given a pass by their wealthy and influential buddies.

These are our neighbors. We are to love them. **Together**, we are to love them and we have to figure out what that looks like here in Aberdeen as the people of Amazing Grace Lutheran Church because that is how we will live!

As the apostle Paul said in the letter to the Colossians, the first reading today: He [Jesus] made it so you could take part in the inheritance, in light granted to God's holy people. ¹³ He rescued us from the control of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. ¹⁴ He set us free through the Son and forgave our sins.

So that we can live lives that are worthy of the Lord and pleasing to [God] in every way: by producing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God.

We have received all things through Christ Jesus. For freedom Christ has set us free so that we may live and in living bring life to all people. Amen.