

Trinity Lutheran Church, Casper, WY  
July 15, 2007

## Neighbors

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, amen. The text for the sermon this morning comes from the Gospel which was read earlier.

It may seem odd that a biblical parable with so obvious a life goal, "*You go and do likewise*" should be triggered by a salvation concern, "*What shall I do to inherit eternal life.*" However peculiar the combination and irrespective of the sincerity and orthodoxy of the lawyer's justification question, that concern is most relevant to the achievement of Jesus' sanctification goal. We learn today that only He who justified and saved us eternally, Jesus, the ultimate Good Samaritan of the Gospel, empowers us to be compassionate like the good Samaritan of the parable.

Isn't that the question we ask ourselves today, "*What shall I do to inherit eternal life?*" The answer is simple, isn't it: just be good. But ask yourself this question: Are you a good person? You might think that you are. You're in church today instead of sleeping. You're giving money to church today instead of giving it to your favorite store in the mall. However, you are not good and neither am I.

There was only one time that we were good. At the time of creation, when God made man, He declared us to be good. All of that changed once Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. When that happened, our status went from good to evil. From that moment on, we became something which we had never been before: sinners.

The lawyer who asks Jesus the million-dollar question doesn't give the answer which we might give. Instead, he answers straight from the Law: "*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.*" For Jesus, that is the correct answer. Hearing this answer, it sounds very much easier said than done, doesn't it? It demands a full keeping of the Ten Commandments, especially Commandments 1-3 which deal with God.

How many of us have kept the Ten Commandments perfectly? How many of us have kept the first three perfectly? The answer to those questions is obvious: none of us. Try as we might, we cannot keep the Ten Commandments, not even one of them. That is the reality in which we live in. But while we cannot keep the Law perfectly, there was one who did: our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He kept the Law perfectly for us because we could not.

Keeping the Law of God was only part of the lawyer's answer. The other part had to do with your neighbor. But the question the lawyer posed to Jesus was not a simple one: "*And who is my neighbor?*"

That question could only lead to volumes of argument. Criteria would have to be established and guidelines written. You could never settle the question of which of the billions of people out there are indeed neighbors.

During confirmation classes with my 7<sup>th</sup> graders, an interesting discussion takes place when we come to Commandments 8-10 which deal with our neighbor. I ask the question, "Who is our neighbor?" When I ask that question, I get all kinds of answers. The obvious answer I get is the person who lives next door. Branching out, we decide to

include those who live on our street and in our neighborhood. More often than not, that's where the neighbor ends. When I ask about other Christians, they're quick to include them, saying they "forgot" about them.

That's the end of the list. When I ask about strangers, they stop and ask me. They're semi-shocked when I say yes. When I ask about our enemies, they're 90% sure they are not our neighbors. They're even more shocked when they find out that they are our neighbors. Finally, when asked about non-Christians, it's a 100% no. Imagine the shock when I told them that even non-Christians are our neighbors.

Who would we say our neighbors are? Would we be quick to include our enemies and non-Christians as our neighbors? Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ included both enemies and non-Christians as His neighbors. He ate with sinners and with tax collectors. Everyone, regardless of state or class was a neighbor of Jesus. Everyone, regardless of state or class is a neighbor of ours. That point could not have been made clearer than in our Gospel for today.

The man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho was probably a Jew. One would imagine the priest of all people would have stopped to help the injured man. Instead, *"when he saw him he passed by on the other side."* Even the Levite *"passed by on the other side."* The priest and the Levite in Christ's parable were religious leaders like the lawyer. They knew the Scriptures well, but both were inclined to ask the same question: "Who is my neighbor?" No doubt they reasoned that they were not obliged to help the half dead man because he did not deserve their help. In their estimation, the man was not a relative or a close friend or anyone to whom they owed a favor. They concluded that the man was not their neighbor whom they were obliged to help – not according to their

understanding of the Law. When the Samaritan came to the man, “*he had compassion.*”

The Samaritan belonged to a mixed race which the Jews hated. The Jews considered the Samaritans heathens, people who were outside of God’s grace and favor. The Jews would have nothing to do with this mixed race living in Samaria. Ordinarily the Samaritans would have nothing to do with the Jews either. The hatred between Jews and Samaritans went both ways.

Men have erected endless boundaries against each other – black and white, old and young, urban and rural, rich and poor. Love of the neighbor ignores labels and sees only human beings. The lawyer wanted to make distinctions. Jesus would not let him. Instead, the lawyer had to admit it was the despised Samaritan, not the proper priest or Levite, who was the loving neighbor to a stranger in need. Love of the neighbor ignores man-made boundaries that separate people from people.

Jesus let the lawyer himself state the lesson of the parable. By turning the lawyer’s question around, Jesus made him give an answer that he could not evade. When Jesus told the lawyer to love the Samaritan, Jesus wanted him to realize that his heart was not right and so his thinking was wrong. In this gentle but firm way, Jesus was preaching the Law to the man in order to lead him to acknowledge his sinfulness.

In the same way, this parable does the same to us: it preaches the Law to us so we can acknowledge our sinfulness. “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” In order to inherit eternal life, one must keep the Law and keep it perfectly. However, we cannot keep the Law. We know to inherit eternal life it is solely by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. What must you do to inherit eternal life? Eternal life has already been given to you and to me and to your neighbor, not on account of what we do but on account of who

we are: sinners in a sinful world, but children of God, made clean by the blood of the Lamb. In the name of Jesus, amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, amen.