

**Fifth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX**  
**10 July 2022**

**Luke 10:25-37**

One of my favorite Spanish hymns growing up is called "He is with us." below is my own imperfect translation. (In Spanish all these verses rhyme. I made no attempt to rhyme them in English. I leave this to hymn writers.)

*"He is with us, but we don't know him.  
He is with us, and his name is The Lord.*

He is the Lord and he is hungry,  
and he cries out through the mouth of the hungry.  
And many who see him begging pass on by,  
perhaps because they want to get to church early. REF.

His Name is the Lord and he is thirsty,  
and he is in those who are thirsty for justice.  
And many who see him pass on by,  
often preoccupied with their own prayers. REF.

His name is the Lord and he is naked,  
the absence of love, freezes his bones.  
And many who see him pass on by,  
safe and comfortable in the warmth of their money. REF.

His name is the Lord and he is sick,  
his agony is the agony of the infirmed.  
And many who see him don't pay him any mind,  
perhaps because he never goes to church. REF.

His name is the Lord and he is in jail,  
He is in the loneliness of every prisoner.  
And no one visits him,  
they even say, 'he wasn't one of us.' REF.

His name is the Lord and he is thirsty,  
he begs through the mouth of the hungry,  
he is in jail, he is sick, he is naked...  
and one day he will judge us for all of this." REF.

The last line of this popular hymn always troubled me and filled me with guilt. God will one day judge us for our failures to care for those in need. This is what the hymn says, and the Gospel passage today seems to be saying the same thing. But I believe we are so familiar with this passage that as soon as we read it, we automatically

go to the moral lesson of caring for our neighbors. I believe this parable has another, perhaps deeper message we miss, precisely because we know it so well. Let me attempt to give you a different interpretation of the passage.

The passage today takes place after Jesus sends the disciples ahead of him, two by two, to prepare the ground for his visit to various Galilean towns. The Disciples return and report all the great things they did in Jesus' name. Jesus then thanks God for allowing the Disciples to see things that are hidden from the wise and the intelligent. Immediately after, perhaps to prove his point about the wise and intelligent "not getting it," Luke tells us that a lawyer comes to Jesus to test him. The questions by the lawyer are not legitimate inquiries, but are meant to trip Jesus up. The lawyer asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Automatically, we know that the question is rather silly. The lawyer uses the word "inheritance." What must I do to inherit? What can anyone do to inherit anything? An inheritance is given at the pleasure of the giver, not the receiver. This question is similar to the question, "What can I do to inherit Elon Musk's money?" The answer of course is "Nothing!" I will get Elon's money, only if he desires to give it to me. There is nothing I can do to force him or anyone to give me an inheritance.

Jesus responds by asking the lawyer two questions, "What is written in the law?" and "What do you read there?" What does the law say and how do you interpret it? These are questions the lawyer knows how to answer well. This is his business. He is more than a Scribe; he is a lawyer. It is his job to know the law inside and out. In fact, Luke tells us that he gave a right answer. He quotes the famous verse from Deuteronomy 6:5, also known as the Shema. Every righteous Jew even today prays this verse at least twice a day. It reads, "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." But then the lawyer adds a mandate from Leviticus 19:18, "and your neighbor as yourself." Not only does he know the right answer, he brilliantly combines two different commands in a way that Christ himself combines. It is believed that prior to Jesus, these two phrases remained standalone principles. Now they are placed together side by side. "Love God and love your neighbor!" I can almost imagine the young lawyer smiling to himself, proud of his brilliance. Jesus tells him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

If this man is looking for a way to earn his entrance into heaven, then all he needs to do is follow this formula. The irony of course is that the lawyer knows that loving God always and loving our neighbor perfectly is extremely difficult, if not impossible. It cannot be done. If the way to earn salvation is by obedience of the Law, then he is in trouble. Unless there is a loophole. Unless he gets to keep all his money and protect his investments, unless the definition of neighbor only includes those we love, unless neighbor means, *like-minded, member of the same class, belonging to the same tribe or family group*. If neighbor means "friend" or "kin" then following the law might be a bit easier. The lawyer asks Jesus for his definition of neighbor, which leads Jesus to the parable of the kind Samaritan.

When we read this parable, we identify with the Samaritan. The conclusion is then that we must be like him. We must help those in need, without regard for class, gender, nationality, or even religious affiliation. The man was so injured, that it would have been difficult for the Samaritan to know if he was wealthy, religious, a good person, etc. All the Samaritan saw was an injured man and he was moved with kindness. Therefore we all must be like the Samaritan. We must do what the hymn I read to you says we must do. We must love the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned, the homeless, etc. The problem here is that Jesus seems to be connecting these actions with eternal life. Does he mean to say that we need all these good works to be saved? Is this what he means?

I believe there is a deeper meaning here. I don't believe any Jew listening to this story would have identified with the Samaritan. Samaritans were despised people. Jews would walk miles to avoid crossing Samaritan territory. To identify with a Samaritan would have been out of the question for any Jew of the day. Most theologians believe that Jews, including this lawyer, would have identified with the person in the gutter and not with the Samaritan. Which means that Jesus wants us to see this lawyer, and ourselves, as the person in the gutter, the person in need of mercy and compassion, the one who without help is destined to die alone and forgotten. Perhaps the real message from Jesus here is that unless we realize how desperate our condition is, and unless we allow someone else to come in and save us, we too will perish. Perhaps the message here is that we can't do nothing to inherit eternal life, in the same way the dying man did nothing to deserve the kindness of one who was seen as the enemy. All the person in the gutter did was to allow the Samaritan to save him. He did not resist him, he did not fight him off, he did not try to save himself or heal himself. This would have been impossible.

The message for the lawyer and for us is "Do as the person in the gutter did!" It is not by works that we inherit, but rather, by accepting God's mercy and compassion. The inheritance has already been given and that inheritance must be received! There is nothing we can do to earn it! The question now is, "Are we still then required to feed, clothe, and welcome the poor among us? Are we to visit the sick and imprisoned?" The answer is yes! (See Matthew 25:33-40.) But before we become Good Samaritans, we must be good gutter people. We must first accept Christ, allowing him to rescue us from the gutter of sin and death. First we let Christ take away all judgement and condemnation and then, out of love and gratitude, we produce the fruits that are expected of a good Christian. We reach out in love to those who are in need.

The parable then can be summarized in the following way: Eternal life comes to those who are so desperately in need that they have no way to earn it, but have to accept it in faith. If there is a moral lesson here, it has to be, "Before you are a Good Samaritan, you must be like the man in the gutter! Realize your own helplessness and accept God's rescuing." Christ is the ultimate Good Samaritan and he is always ready and willing to save us! I pray today that you will let him rescue you from the gutter. Eternal life is his gift and our inheritance, and he alone has the right to give it away. Amen.