

Seeking: Questions People Asked Jesus sermon series
Who Is My Neighbor? – Luke 10:25-37
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We're continuing our sermon series called "Seeking: Questions People Asked Jesus." We have questions. So did people in the Bible. And I bet that a lot of their questions are our questions too, which tells me we haven't done a great job of figuring out this faith thing in the last 2000 years. Thankfully, faith isn't something to be figured out; it's something to be lived out, no matter how imperfectly or sporadically. Jesus doesn't say, "Understand me." He says, "Follow me."

That's part of the challenge he offers in our story today. You know, you can learn a lot about the question being asked by looking at the person who's asking it. Today's contestant is a lawyer, who's not painted in a very favorable light. Now, I'm NOT going to insert a lawyer joke here for two reasons. First, I have a lot of respect for lawyers and the hard work they do. And second, lawyers in Jesus' time were people who studied God's law, which makes them much more like pastors than lawyers. So, attorneys, you're off the hook on this one.

This lawyer actually asked Jesus two questions. First, he asks him, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" We've heard that question before, haven't we? A few weeks ago, we looked at the story of the rich young ruler, who asks Jesus this question then walks away dejected when he doesn't like the answer. Sometimes trying to understand Jesus is a lot easier than trying to follow him.

Like a good rabbi, Jesus turns the man's first question back around to him, asking him what the law says. Now, Jesus knows what the law says, and he knows this man knows what the law says. This guy studied the law, so this question must have felt simplistic, like asking a teacher to say their ABCs. The lawyer responds beautifully, perfectly, acing this quiz with an A+. "You have given the right answer," Jesus says. Yes! You know you're going to pass the class when the teacher calls you out for doing such a good job.

In one of my seminary classes a few years ago, we had to bring an object from our church that symbolized our church's identity. I brought in a coat hook, because we have approximately five million coat hooks here at Crestwood. When the Pastor's Class kids act up, I make them go and count coat hooks as punishment. I went first and talked about how the coat hook represented our church's spirit of hospitality, the openness we have to the community, how we're a place where anyone is welcome to come in, hang up their coat, and find a safe place. When I finished, the professor said, "Well done!" My chest puffed out just a bit and my chin went up. The teacher likes me! And then, after every other presentation, the teacher said, "Well done!"

I imagine the lawyer's head swell just a little bit when Jesus said, "You have given the right answer." But then Jesus adds, "Do this and you will live." Do this. Remember the first question? "What must I DO to inherit eternal life?" Jesus says, "Do this," knowing full well that the lawyer and the rest of humanity cannot actually do this to perfection. We all fall short.

As if to prove that point, the lawyer goes one step further, asking a clarifying question. "And who is my neighbor?" The Bible tells us the lawyer was trying to vindicate himself or justify himself. The Message says he was looking for a loophole in the law. C'mon, man! You just gave the perfect answer to the test question and now you're trying to get extra credit? But Jesus, sensing exactly what the lawyer is doing, doesn't answer his question. Instead, he tells a story.

Now, pause right there a second. What's the lawyer up to here? I'd like to tell you that he wants a sincere definition from Jesus of who his neighbor is so that he can go out and fulfill Jesus' command. I'd like to tell you that, but that's not what's happening. No, he's looking for a loophole. He wants Jesus to put limits on the definition of neighbor. He wants Jesus to say, "Your neighbor is someone like you, someone who believes like you, someone who acts like you," so that the lawyer can say, "Oh, great! I've already done that, too. Anything else I need to do, or am I set for eternal life?"

"Who is my neighbor?" What the lawyer is really asking is, "Who is not my neighbor?" Who can I legitimately not worry about and still feel good about myself?" The lawyer wants Jesus to put some guardrails up, to say that there are lines we don't have to cross to follow him, that, in this "us" and "them" world, there are exclusions to who is our neighbor. If he can get Jesus to limit the law's demand, then the lawyer can limit his responsibility. The lawyer wants to know his neighbor so he can also know his non-neighbor and put up a boundary between "us" and "them."

Are boundaries such a bad thing? Don't we need them? Sure, they can exclude people, but they can also solidify our sense of identity. We are not Northern Mexicans or Southern Canadians. We are Americans, and we know that because we know where the boundaries are. Boundaries help clarify what is ours and what is theirs. Boundaries help maintain social order. We live here, they live there. Robert Frost says in his poem "The Mending Wall" that "Good fences make good neighbors." The lawyer wants Jesus to build a fence. Instead, he builds a bridge with the familiar story of the Good Samaritan.

A man is brutally beaten and left for dead, and two potential Israelite heroes – a priest and a Levite – pass by without helping. There are lots of good explanations for this. They may have been on their way to an important church meeting or they may have been wary of touching the man and making themselves ritually unclean or they may have been afraid that they would also get beaten up. Sure, you can call them loopholes if you want, but they all sound like good reasons not to help, right? I bet any one of us would say the same thing.

I was standing in line at the Penn Station in Zandale once and watched out the window as an elderly man tentatively made his way toward the restaurant door to come in. As he got close, he tripped and fell into one of the chairs, injuring himself. And instantaneously this conversation happened in my brain: "Oh no! I should go and help! But I don't know this man. But I should help! But he's probably OK, he can get up himself. But maybe I should help. But if he's badly injured, I don't want to make it worse. So maybe helping isn't the right thing to do. After all, what if I help and he gets mad at me for helping? I mean, the Christian thing to do would be to help, but a lot of things could go wrong, too. Oh good! Someone else is helping! See, I didn't need to help him, after all." Thank God for Good Samaritans, right? They keep us from having to be neighbors.

In this story, the Samaritan would have been a shock to the system of Jesus' listeners. Samaritans were hated enemies of the Jews, a race created when Jews and Assyrians co-mingled, creating mixed-race children despised by both sides. If you're a Harry Potter fan, Samaritans are the equivalent of Muggles. To make a Samaritan the hero of this story was blasphemous of Jesus. In a simple story, he systematically deconstructed the carefully built boundaries of the Jews.

At the end of the story, Jesus doesn't give the lawyer an answer to his question. Instead, he asks him, "So, in this story, who was the neighbor?" The lawyer can't even bring himself to say the word "Samaritan." "The one who showed mercy," he said. Once again, he gives the right

answer! You think Jesus would pat him on the head and say, “Wow, you’re a smart cookie! You’re going to be in the front of the line to get into heaven. Eternal life is in the bag for you.” But he doesn’t say that, does he? Instead, he says, “Go and do likewise.”

Did you notice all the action verbs in this story? The lawyer asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus says about the law, “Do this and you shall live.” In the parable, the Samaritan went and bandaged and treated and brought and took care of the injured man. And after telling the story, Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.” Ethicist Stanley Hauerwas wrote, “The intelligibility and truthfulness of Christian convictions reside in their practical force.” In other words, Jesus doesn’t say, “Understand me.” He said, “Follow me.”

That’s the lawyer’s problem. He knew the law, could recite it from memory. He was a great student. He loved to talk about God, to wrestle with concepts and ideas and theories. That’s what we’re doing in our Crestwood University class right now. We’ve had some great discussions about God and Jesus, and today we’ll tackle the Holy Spirit. Should only take about five minutes to figure that one out! But following Christ is not about knowing all the right things, about spouting the right doctrine and ascribing to the right tenets. Will Willimon says, “Christianity is meant to be embodied, performed, practiced, acted, rather than simply believed, affirmed, understood, or acclaimed.” Jesus doesn’t say to the lawyer, “That’s the right answer.” He says, “Go and do.”

Do what? In short, be a neighbor. That’s different than defining who your neighbor is, isn’t it? The point of the story is not about extending help to someone in trouble, but about knowing how to fulfill the great commandment. Dr. King wrote in “Strength to Love,” “The question the priest and the Levite ask is, ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ But the Samaritan reversed the question. ‘If I don’t stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’”

“Who is my neighbor?” The lawyer wanted Jesus to draw boundaries. Instead, Jesus changed the question to, “How can I be a neighbor to others?” To be clear, this is not a sermon about doing more and feeling guilty if you don’t. After all, the very next story is about busy Martha and her lazy sister Mary, who sits at Jesus’ feet and is ultimately praised. No, this is a story about not confusing the knowing, understanding, feeling, thinking, or saying of love with the doing of love.

Are you a good neighbor? Well, depends on who my neighbor is, right? Jesus says that our neighbor is anyone in need of neighboring. The lawyer wanted to complicate things, but Jesus says, “Don’t get bogged down in definitions and boundaries. Just be a good neighbor.” Are we good neighbors? I see a lot of people lying in the middle of the road, beaten by life’s circumstances and bloodied from the sin of prejudice, bruised by the church’s exclusion. Biblical scholar NT Wright says, “No church, no Christian, can remain content with easy definitions which allow us to watch most of the world lying half dead in the road.”

“Which of these three was the neighbor?” “The one who showed mercy.” “Go and do likewise.”