

Who Is Our Neighbor

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] Our God and Father, we ask that your word may be open to our hearts and our hearts may be open to hear and obey your word. In Christ's name, amen. Well, this morning I want to preach from the 10th chapter of Luke, which we haven't read as a lesson this morning, but I find the necessity to preach from it anyway because it's been on my mind and heart for some time, and I want to share it with you.

So I'd ask you to turn to it, and it's found in page 67, 68 of the New Testament section of your Blue View Bible.

And it's nice to come back after a holiday and find that the windows along the side have been repaired.

I hope you all noticed that. That there's new front doors that have been installed, and that there's a new deck here to preach from. I don't know if you noticed this or not, but this is the lovely work of Rod Laughlin, who most of you, I think, will know, and it's nice to have it.

This story is the story of the Good Samaritan, and you know it well, I suspect, but I'm going to tell it to you anyway. It starts in verse 25, where a lawyer, I've been having some trouble with a lawyer recently, so this was perhaps what guided me to this passage, to get back.

[2 : 00] A lawyer stood up and put him to the test, saying, Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus knew how to handle lawyers.

What's written? How do you read it? Well, of course, the reading is simple. All you have to do is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength and body, and your neighbor is yourself.

And Jesus dismissed the case at that point by saying, Well done. This do, and you will live. But the story wasn't over from the lawyer's point of view, as it rarely is.

And he said, Yes, but who is my neighbor? And then Jesus told him this wonderful parable, a parable which in the whole history of the world has probably been more powerful than any atomic bomb that's ever been left off.

Only this has been powerful for good instead of powerful for evil. Not powerful in the form of death and destruction, but powerful in the form of life and love and the relationships between people.

[3 : 25] And this is the parable that he told, the powerful parable, that a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho fell among thieves, and in the course of having fallen among them he was robbed and beaten and left for dead.

And lying there wounded and dying on the side of the road, a priest came by and saw him and passed by on the other side. A Levite came along and saw him and passed by on the other side.

A Samaritan, one of the people who ethnically and culturally and theologically and religiously was not a very acceptable kind of person, came down and was moved in here with compassion for the man who lay there and did something about it.

Dressed his wounds, poured oil and wine into his wounds, bound them up, put them on his donkey, carried him to an inn, found him a place to sleep and to rest and to convalesce, left some money for the care of him, and promised that he would be back if there was any further charge.

And then Jesus turned to the lawyer and said, All right, who was neighbor to him who fell among thieves? And the lawyer took hold of the answer.

[4 : 56] It was very obvious. Well, the reason I want to tell you about it is first that the lawyer put him to the test. And I'm sure there must come a time for all of us when we would like to put Jesus to the test.

And I'm sure that there's a lot of people in the world who feel that they have done that and that Jesus has failed the test. And so they no longer have anything to do with it.

When I first came back, on the way back from our holiday this week, I met a lady who pointed her finger at me and said, Because of you, I no longer have any faith in institutional religion.

And I was dumbfounded and didn't know how to answer her except to say, Neither do I. She was hurt and angry and there was nothing more I could say to her except submit to that.

And if you put institutional religion to the test, I think it will fail and fail and fail and fail.

[6 : 08] I don't think there's any question about that. But this isn't institutional religion that's being put to the test here. The lawyer puts Jesus to the test and says to him, All right, if you are who you say you are, then tell me this.

What must I do to inherit eternal life? Now that's the ultimate question. The question that I think haunts the heart of all of us.

It's the question, Who am I? It's the question, What is the meaning of my life? It's the question, When I see a granite rock which I am told is thousands and thousands and thousands of years old, and I see in myself the evidence of not passing very many more years on this earth, I say, Why should that rock be permanent?

And I am so impermanent. Why should that rock be, as it were, almost eternal, and I am just a transitory creature of time, caught up in a moment of time and history, and soon I'll be gone and it will be as though nothing had ever been.

Why is that different? What do I have to do to have meaning? What do I have to do to have eternal life? What is the meaning of my existence?

[7 : 42] And as I look at the transitory nature of all of us gathered together, holding on by the slender thread of meaning to our own individual and corporate existence, and what do we mean as a congregation and as a people?

Why is our meaning so transitory? Why is it that we're here today on this lovely Sunday morning in August, but our life is not that significant, and it will soon be past and forgotten.

Is there no reality to our life beyond that so that I can be treated as totally insignificant? What do I have to do to inherit eternal life?

What is going to give meaning and quality and purpose to my life? It's a very, very lovely question. Right down at the heart.

We all have to face it. You've got to answer. Even though you may be mean and miserly and unwilling to articulate what the answer is, somewhere within you, you've got to have an answer.

[8 : 57] What gives meaning to my life? Your answer may be nothing, of course, and the consequences of that are fairly significant, too, if that is your answer.

So that's the question. He tests him. He tests him with his question. But the trouble is, and this is the agony of our humanity as far as I can see, is that even though he can articulate the question so clearly, the problem is that he knows the answer.

And that's what I think is so frustrating about institutional religion, is that we know what the answer is. The lawyer knew, and you know.

And you don't have, you can go to anybody, anywhere, in this city this morning, and they ultimately will give you the same answer. To love God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength and body, and your neighbor is yourself.

Now there may be a lot of variations into how they express that and what they mean by God, but basically they have the answer, and they know it. And Jesus told the lawyer, you've done well, you've answered the question, go and do it, and live.

[10 : 24] There's nothing more for you to do. Isn't our faith so frustrating at that point? When we desperately want to do something more, we desperately want to have some great justifying act by which we can justify ourselves, and we're told, that's it, you know the answer, go and do it.

There's nothing more. Well, thank God for the lawyer, he wasn't satisfied. And he says, who is my neighbor?

Now, this is why I ask the children about what do you do when you're stalling. You keep asking questions because you won't do what you have to do. So he asks the question, who is my neighbor?

And somehow we have learned that probably that's the best way to live with religion is in perpetual doubt and questioning.

That is, we go on questioning and questioning and questioning and questioning and doubting, and that leads to more questions and questions and doubts, and the whole thing goes on, and we live the whole of our lives, and we've never come to an answer.

[11 : 38] We have created in our hearts and at the center of our being a kind of fog of questioning and doubt that never precipitates into action of any kind, and so we fill our days in that doubt and in that question, saying there isn't an answer, and never get to the point where we go and do it.

So he says, who is my neighbor? And it's then that Jesus drops the peace bomb in the parable that he puts into his hand.

He says, here you are. The parable is a very simple one. It's the parable of the man who fell among thieves, was beaten, robbed, left to die, and one man came along and passed by on the other side and another man.

You see, it's such a lovely story because it's the kind of thing that could have happened to you on the way to church this morning. It's the kind of thing that might happen to you this afternoon. It's such an ordinary, everyday kind of experience that all of us, if we were to sit around and discuss it, could give a million variations on this simple story and say, yes, that happened.

And then having acknowledged that it's part of the experience of our daily life, we then recognize that it's part of an experience of our lifetime as well, the whole of our life.

[13 : 15] That is, that somewhere in the whole of your life, you have this one moment in which, moved with compassion, you know what you have to do.

God grant that you may be able to do it. Why are you a lawyer? Presumably because at one point in your life you wanted to bring justice to people who were denied.

Why are you a doctor? Because at one point in your life you wanted to bring healing to the sick. Why are you a teacher? Because at one point in your life you wanted to bring learning to those who were young and innocent and head didn't know.

Why are you a nurse? Because you care for people and want to minister to them. Why are you a minister? Because you've seen people in despair and you want to bring them hope.

So all of us have this experience in our lives and this experience becomes in effect the motivating force in our life. The thing that shapes what we do with our lives.

[14 : 37] How we commit our lives. How we consecrate ourselves to the thing that we want to do. But having made that commitment the next thing we do is get the professional training in order to fulfill that commitment.

and what the professional training is and I'm being very cynical in saying this but I'm saying it in order that you might hear it and understand it. What our professional training is largely is to teach us to walk by on the other side to avoid the problem so that you get doctors who say I went into medicine and I'm not allowed to do the thing that I want to do.

I'm called to be a teacher and my time is all taken up with administration. I'm called to be a minister of the gospel and I spend all my time in ecclesiastical functions.

I am a nurse and I spend all my time writing out reports. So somehow that thing which we acknowledge to be the thing that we wanted to do we don't do because we have learned how to walk by on the other side.

How to avoid it. And that in fact our preservation of ourselves demands that we avoid it. We cannot afford to go and help every guy that we see beaten up and left on the side of the road.

[16 : 14] It just is not expedient to work that way. We'll introduce ambulances and hospitals and paramedics and various other people. We can push buttons, ring bells, get them there and they deal with it.

But we don't have to do it because we are trained to walk by on the other side. We see the needs of people crying out to us and in order to survive in a world where there are so many people like that we train ourselves to walk by on the other side.

And that's what's happened to this lawyer. He's been trained to do that. And having been trained to do that he comes to that unhappy moment in his life when he says what am I going to do to inherit eternal life?

Where is the meaning of my life going to be? Jesus takes him back to the beginning and says you know the law right? You know the law.

You know the circumstance right? You know the circumstance. Well that's what you're to do. Now the difficulty is you see that when the Samaritan came along he didn't know any better.

[17 : 37] He was very unprofessional in his treatment of this man. Very unprofessional indeed. he was very badly motivated as well because he was moved with compassion.

In here he was responding to his guts. That's what the Greek says. I'm not just trying to shock you with such a naughty word. But he was he was responding from here to a situation that was there.

And in responding from here he went and tried to help the man. the glorious thing is that when he tried to help the man he saw what he needed.

He needed some wine. I happened to have some. And he needed some oil. I happened to have some. And then he needed an ambulance and I happened to have a donkey. And he needed a place for this man to go and he found a hotel.

And he was able to leave him there. And then he was able to find time to come back and see how he was getting along. And he found that he in fact had the resources in his pocket to pay for this.

[18 : 47] So having been led from here to do that he suddenly found he had the resources to do it. Which he had been trained to know that he didn't have the resources to do it.

You see how fine a point that is in the whole of our relationship to God. That's the same point the disciples were brought to when they were told these people need bread.

How are we going to feed them? And one of them says 200 penny worth of bread isn't sufficient. We couldn't. Well, bring me what you have. And that I think is the essential miracle in our lives in which we come in touch with the reality of the God who confronts us in Jesus Christ.

that we are unable to do what we commit ourselves to doing even from here. Now, that's not logical.

It's not sensible. But that's what happened. And that's what the lawyer was told. Well, this is the point that we so desperately need in our lives.

[20 : 06] we need to know who our neighbor is. And I assure you that the difficulty is that your neighbor is probably very close to you indeed.

the fact that you carefully walked around him or her or it for a long time doesn't mean that it's not there.

And if you could pray that your eyes might be open to know who your neighbor is, who is it? you know, one of the most profound parts of this powerful parable is that there is a very real sense in which our neighbor is Jesus Christ himself.

it's he that has been beaten and he that has been robbed and he that has been left to die by our society.

That's what we've done to him. So many people, you will find, acknowledge the fact that Jesus, the treasures that he brought to us have been taken from him and he has been beaten and he is on the point of death so there is no further hope in him.

[21 : 41] So we've got to find a hope for ourselves. We've got to find meaning apart. Then it was he that taught us in as much as you have made the stranger welcome, visited the prison, healed the sick, fed the hungry.

You've done it to me. So that somehow in that compassion and concern that we have for the neighbor, that person has become for us the very presence of Jesus Christ in our lives.

that's how Christ has come to us and confronted us. It's hard, isn't it?

I think it's hard. It's hard because I am a professional religious man. man. And I find this is not what people want to hear.

And I want to tell them what I know they want to hear. But I want, I have to tell them that you want to know God? He is the one who is robbed and beaten and left to die.

[23 : 04] And that's what our century has done. It is almost beaten God to death so that he no longer is part of the learning in the university.

He's no longer part of the great religious functions of the world whereby because of the multiplicity of religions we're not allowed to talk about any of them.

He's not part of the missionary effort anymore in the world that people should come to know him. He has been beaten by Marxism and materialism and progressivism and secularism and humanism.

And all of them have said, we don't need him. And in saying that, they in effect have left him to die. And then the man of our age, the lawyer, comes along and says, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

The answer is, you see that man dying there? That's what you want to do. Relate to him. In his woundedness, in the poverty of his having been robbed, the fact that all hope is gone for him, human.

[24 : 32] And then Jesus said to the lawyer, which one of these was neighbor unto him who fell on the road. What does it mean to be a neighbor?

What does it mean to love your neighbor? him? I'm a... See, the terrible part of this, and I tell you it's terrible, but it's terrible in the sense of being awesome.

Terrible in the sense of being really difficult to get hold of. because the man who illustrates was a Samaritan.

The person who should have known, the person who should have done it, the person who should have recognized it, the priest, the Levite, the teacher, the doctor, the nurse, the professor, the philosopher, the one who should have known to do it, the minister, the one who should have known.

All he had learned to do was how to walk by on the other side. The Samaritan did it. And, uh, Jesus ends the story by saying to the, to the, to the lawyer, go and do.

[26 : 00] Couldn't be simpler, could it? Two, two-letter words. Go and do. Likewise. And, uh, that's why if you want to put Jesus to the test, watch out.

Because, as for the lawyer, so with you and me, the thing will backfire. you will find it's not him who's being put to the test in our society at all.

It's not him who is dying. It's us. What we need to do is come to terms with that reality.

is so close to us as to be quite frightening.

Yet, that's the reality in which I think we are called to live as those who are disciples of Jesus Christ. now we sing together our offertory hymn 475.

[27 : 38] 5. Auschwitser People In called Take balanced Being God Thank Am Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen.