



GOD TALK – GOD’S WORK
Luke 10:25-37

Today, I open with the words of our scripture lesson written by Dr. Eugene H. Peterson:

Just then a religion scholar stood up with a question to test Jesus. “Teacher, what do I need to do to get eternal life?”

He answered, “What’s written in God’s Law? How do you interpret it?”

He said, “That you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence - and that you love your neighbor as well as you do yourself.”

“Good answer!” said Jesus. “Do it and you’ll live.”

Looking for a loophole, he asked, “And just how would you define ‘neighbor’?”

Jesus answered by telling a story. “There was once a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. One the way he was attacked by robbers. They took his clothes, beat him up, and went off leaving him half-dead. Luckily, a priest was on his way down the same road, but when he saw him he angled across to the other side. Then a Levite religious man showed up; he also avoided the injured man.

A Samaritan traveling the road came on him. When he saw the man’s condition, his heart went out to him. He gave him first aid, disinfecting and bandaging his wounds. Then he lifted him on to his donkey, led him to an inn, and made him comfortable. In the morning he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take good care of him. If it costs any more, put it on my bill - I’ll pay you on my way back.’

“What do you think? Which of the three became a neighbor to the man attacked by robbers?”

“The one who treated him kindly,” the religion scholar responded.

Jesus said, “Go and do the same.”¹

This summer we are studying the parables of Jesus. Today’s lesson is known not only by Christians - but a majority of the general population as well. It has a power to move more people to a response than you will find in very few pieces of literature.

Many of the young people of our church were raised watching the television show “Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood.” The question that pulsates from that show is **“Please won’t you be my neighbor?”** That question is probably on the lips of the man lying in the ditch on the Jericho road in our lesson today.

As we learned last week a parable invites our participation and response.

In **Luke 10:1-24**, Jesus commissioned 70 short-term missionaries. They went into the towns of Samaria and they marveled at how even the demons submitted to them in the power of Jesus’ name. They were rejoicing and Jesus shares how blessed they are. They have experienced what others only have hoped and longed for. Instead of just God talk – they actually were involved in God’s work.

Nearby there was a religious scholar or lawyer who overheard this conversation between Jesus and the 70 - and is intrigued by what he has observed. These 70 men did not have the training and knowledge he had gained and gathered in his journey of faith. He probably wondered why they were they so blessed and joyful and he was not.

This man would not be the kind of lawyer who is the butt of the lawyer jokes our culture loves to revel in. This man is what we would call in the courtroom “an expert witness of the Mosaic law.” He would be recognized as a pillar of his community. He would probably be the Lay Leader of the United Methodist Church of Jericho. His work was important work.

This man would hear the comment of Fred Rogers: “Please won’t you be my neighbor” and write a 12 page brief about it. His answers as we will discover in a few moments, are 100% correct. A+! Jesus even says **“Good answer!”**

Here is one of the most significant questions of life **“What must I do to inherit eternal life”** and Jesus tells a story. Go figure! However, stories or parables have been used to communicate truth and faith for thousands of years. They have stood the relentless test of time and academia - and have done quite well.

Many of you who are my age or older might remember the television ads of the State Farm Company: **“Like a good neighbor, State Farm is there.”**

Jesus’ story did not define the neighbor. It creates a neighbor. One cannot define a neighbor – one can only be a neighbor.² **Let me share an example.**

“Gary, a youth pastor in Michigan, set off in the church van with a group of teenagers and headed for North Dakota, Montana, and Idaho. The purpose of their trip was to experience adventure, bonding, and spiritual challenge in the Great American West. The idea was good, but the aging van didn’t cooperate - nor did certain people along the way.

When the van broke down somewhere in Montana, Gary called a church in his denomination. He asked if the young people could spend the night in the church building. They all had sleeping bags and could sleep on the floor. Sadly, the church’s leaders said no. So the group had to stay in a motel while they waited 2 days for repairs on the van to be completed.

Time dragged on and the young people were getting restless. Aware of their plight, a local woman took them to her ranch. She taught them to ride horses, let them help with the chores, and fed them wonderful meals. Meanwhile, the mechanic repaired their van on a cost-only basis. Ironically, neither the rancher nor the repairman was churchgoers.”³ God talk is easy – God’s work is better.

Being a neighbor is not limited to a geographical location. The opportunity to be a neighbor can happen anywhere – even here in the church house.

A man came to worship in a United Methodist church. He sat down for the few minutes before the service, but he kept his hat on. After a few minutes the head usher came to him and said, **“Sir, we would appreciate it if you would remove your hat.”** The man thanked him, but did not make any move to change his attire. A few minutes later the president of the Trustees came up to the man and said, **“Sir there’s a tradition that you don’t wear hats in church.”** The man said, “Yes, I know. Thank you very much.” The trustee chair walked away and the man kept his hat on. A few minutes later the Lay Leader came up to the man. **“Sir, it’s an old Christian tradition that men remove their hats in church.”**

The man gave a thumbs up sign to the Lay Leader and he walked away, but the man left his hat in place.

After the service, the minister came up to the man and said, **“Sir, why in the world would you leave your hat on in church? It’s not really appropriate to do that.”**

The man replied, “Listen, I’ve been coming to this church for three months and no one has ever spoken a word to me. Today I was greeted by the head usher, the chair of the Trustees and the Lay Leader. Not bad for one day, wouldn’t you say?”

Our children will learn upstairs, “That showing God’s love means we do more than just talk about caring for others: we put our works into action.”

Recently, in the State of California, billboards have appeared proclaiming messages “From God.” One of them said, “That part about loving your neighbor - I really meant it. Signed God.” Yes, loving our neighbors is an important dimension of our Christian faith. It is not optional.

Neighbors - neighborhoods - being neighborly is a nice concept on paper - but a difficult one to live out beyond the words on a piece of paper. I don’t want to romanticize this story or the word today.

Jesus is trying to teach the disciples (the 70) that faith which reaches only the head and not the heart - causes poor circulation that leads eventually to death or legalism.

John Lennon of the Beatles once wrote in a song “Life is what happens when you are making other plans.” I think this describes what’s happening to our religious scholar or lawyer in our lesson today.

The variety of characters in our parable today has always fascinated me. You almost wonder how Jesus crammed them all into such a short story. You have a stranger - thieves - robbers - a lawyer or scholar - a priest - a scribe - a Samaritan - and an innkeeper.

Without further chit-chat let us look anew at the exchange between Jesus and the Mosaic lawyer.

- **Verse 25** - “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus probably could see from his manner of dress and language that the man was a religious scholar or scribal expert.
- **Verse 26** - “What is written in the law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” Jesus knew that any Jewish male who had been bar mitzvahed could have answered this. It was repeated in the Shema - which was recited each day and night - and in the synagogue worship. The lawyer had probably recited it at least once that day.

Now to an insight that can be easily overlooked in **verse 25**. When a Jewish rabbi taught he taught sitting down - and his disciples, students, learners would sit at his feet as a sign of the respect and authority they had for the position. So when the lawyer stood up - it was a direct challenge to Jesus. As Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe shares: “**It was a good question asked with a bad motive**”⁴ because the lawyer hoped to set Jesus up - but quickly finds his feet in wet cement.

You can only imagine how the lawyer felt when he had to answer his own question. The lawyer answers correctly by reciting what is found in **Leviticus 19:18** "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 love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus replies in **verse 28** "You have answered correctly. **Do this and you will live.**" It was as if Jesus said 'Your legal brief is sound - now put it into circulation.' Sometimes as Dr. Fred B. Craddock shares: "The nod of recognition brings with it the shock of recognition."⁵ Knowing and seeing that Jesus had just praised a group of 70 missionaries who had come back from doing God's work in the towns and cities of Samaria - the lawyer was just beginning to realize how radical this responsibility of the law was! Could foreigners and strangers be included and counted in the word '**neighbor?**' I don't think Mr. Rogers' assertion "**Would you please be my neighbor**" was at the top of his agenda. The question was more like '**Do you mean they are my neighbors?**' This theological insight of Jesus was causing deep problems of application for him. It still does. It is this truth that the church of Jesus Christ has wrestled with for 2,000 years. Remember, the Bible is our Authority. Jesus is our Master.

In all honesty - we are much better at limiting God's love - than enlarging it. This still is the problem in Israel today. If I would rewrite this story for our times I would call it "**The Parable of the Good Iranian.**" This still is the problem of most hearts today.

One of the reasons I draw this conclusion is found in the parable itself. When Jesus asked the lawyer in **verse 36** - "who was the neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

In **verse 37** - the lawyer could not bring himself to say '**The Samaritan man**' - all he could say was, "The one who had mercy on him." Once again Jesus declares to the lawyer "**Go and do likewise.**" Did he? Will we?

In church publications we have a Charlie Brown-type cartoon character called "**Pontius Puddle.**" The creator of this character uses the cartoon as a way for the church and her laborers to see and mirror both our worst and best sides. In this particular strip Pontius Puddle is walking down a city street and he thinks out loud "I wonder if God can really hear me." So in the next frame he actually shouts out "**Hey, God, what do you want me to do with my life?**"

Well, lo and behold a voice from above says, "**Feed the hungry! Fight injustice! Work for peace!**"

Pontius Puddle looks up to the heavens and says, "**Just testing, God. Just testing.**"

Then a voice from heaven says, "**Same here, Pontius. Same here!**"

I would like to close this sermon today with these insightful words from the pen of the late Mother Teresa who wrote these words that Beth K. shared at our last Alpha class. This poem was found in the living quarters of Mother Teresa's in the home for children in Calcutta, India. She rewrote or re-interpreted a prayer that had been written by Dr. Kent M. Keith.

People are often unreasonable and self-centered.
Forgive them anyway.
If you are kind, people may accuse you of ulterior motives.
Be kind anyway.
If you are honest, people may cheat you.
Be honest anyway.
If you find happiness, people may be jealous.
Be happy anyway.
The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow.
Do good anyway.
Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough.
Give your best anyway.
For you see, in the end, it is between you and God.
It never was between you and them anyway.⁶

On this Fourth of July weekend as we celebrate the birth of our nation, think of the spiritual renewal that would take place if we would “**go and do likewise.**”
May our God talk – propel us forward to do God’s work.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
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ENDNOTES

1. Eugene H. Peterson, **THE MESSAGE**, **The New Testament in Contemporary English**, NavPress, 1993, page 145.

² Eugene H. Peterson, **TELL IT SLANT**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 2008, page 42.

3. **THE DAILY BREAD**, September 1st Devotional.

4. Warren W. Wiersbe, **BE COMPASSIONATE**, Luke 1-13, (Victor Books, 1988, page 114).

5. Fred B. Craddock, **PREACHING**, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1985, pages 160-161.

⁶ www.prayerfoundation.org/mother_teresa_do_it_anyway.htm, accessed 6-30-10.