

The Parable of the Inquisitive Lawyer

Luke 10:25-37

July 15, 2007

The problem with familiar stories is that we often tune them out. Many of you here today probably think you know all you'll ever need or want to know about the Good Samaritan. Maybe you figure you can relax and begin thinking about what you're going to have for lunch. But I hope you'll stay with me this morning. I think there's something new here. At least it was new to me when I read the story for what must be at least the 100th time!

I want to suggest a new title for today's scripture reading, "the parable of the Inquisitive Lawyer," in honor of the lawyer who asks Jesus "What must I do to inherit eternal life." Now this lawyer is a well educated student of the law – the Law of Moses – and he calls Jesus "Teacher", and so Jesus answers him in typical rabbinical style, by asking another question. There's the old story about the student who asks the rabbi, "Why do rabbis always answer a question with a question," to which the rabbi responds, "Why do you ask?"

So Jesus, the rabbi, asks the lawyer "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" And the well informed lawyer promptly responds with the correct answer, "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." And Jesus agrees with him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

Then the lawyer asks another question. "And who is my neighbor?" Instead of answering with another question, Jesus chooses to respond with this well known story that we all love, and then to ask a question of his own, "who was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" To which the lawyer, again answers correctly – "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus tells him one more time, "Go and do likewise."

These questions and answers are of utmost importance. And the lawyer knew the answers before he asked the questions. And in both cases Jesus agreed with him. It would seem that there is no issue here. There are two good answers to two good questions, and two men who agree with one another.

Unfortunately, however, it's not quite that simple because we have a questioner who has no intention of following the truth of the answers he already knows. Many doctors know this situation – "What must I do to inherit a healthy life?" we ask the doctor at our annual physical? And he or she responds with a question, "What do your experience and knowledge tell you" And confidently we reply, "Quit smoking," or "lose weight," or "get more exercise," or "manage stress better."

"You have answered wisely – do this and you will live." But do those of us who ask the doctor really have any intention of doing those things that we already know, or do we want some kind of magic bullet or magic pill that will give us a healthy life without doing the work or making the changes it takes to achieve it? We need to think about that answer before we condemn the lawyer.

The truth is having the right answers does not mean that we know what health is any more than the lawyer's giving Jesus the right answers that day means that he knows God. As Fred Craddock has remarked, "Students can make a four-point in Bible and miss the point."¹

So that's what I want us to think about today. What's the difference between knowing the right answers and knowing God? Jesus tells a parable about four men on a journey. One man has been attacked, beaten, and lies wounded in a ditch. Two other men, men who know the right answers, -- a priest and a Levite – pass the injured man without offering assistance because the answer they've always been told and they've always believed tells them that their duty lies

elsewhere and that reaching out to this man who may even be dead could lead to their own personal jeopardy – either from attack by the same robbers who perpetrated the first attack, so then there'd be three injured men in the ditch instead of only one – or by contamination with an unclean person, which would render them incapable of carrying out their temple duties. So, what's it going to be – they decide on the safest route both personally and professionally – staying clean, staying out of the fray, and going on to church. It's important to remember here that these persons are not bad people; they are very good people. They are steeped in their traditions, and their service to the religious community is valuable. They continue on their way because they are sure they know the right answers.

And then along comes another man, from a different background than the first two, and probably from the man in the ditch as well. He's a Samaritan, whose beliefs about God are different from the Jews of his day, but regardless, he's a believer in God in his own way too. But he is touched with compassion for the man in the ditch, and so he goes outside of all of the purity laws of his own tradition to assist the victim. He bandages his wounds; he takes him to an inn to rest and recover; he guarantees his room and board. And only then, he continues on his way.

Those who passed by knew the definition of the word “neighbor;” but the Samaritan became a neighbor. And Jesus instruction is to be a neighbor, not just to know intellectually what the word means. In being a neighbor, we are drawing close to the kingdom, we are becoming inheritors of eternal life. It's not in the knowing; it's in the doing.

This story is more than just a moral tale. It is a parable, and parables are tricky; they always have “something shocking, surprising, unexpected, something to be wrestled with and puzzled over.”² And the puzzle that I've found today is in the lawyer's quandary as he hesitantly, resistantly, comes to realize that what he recognizes as true and of God in the actions of the Samaritan contradicts everything he knows about the law.

The lawyer wasn't the first person to be caught between knowing and doing. Jesus himself had a choice to make. Should he support the traditions and customs of the elders, fulfill the pious expectations of what a good Jewish man ought to say and do, reinforce religious tradition and certainty, or present his own vision of the kingdom of God? The apostle Paul knew the laws probably better than this lawyer who questioned Jesus, and then he had an experience of Jesus, and had to rethink everything he knew in light of that experience.

I'm reading a book right now called “They Like Jesus but not the Church,” and its about all those folks who don't go to church but who nonetheless are attracted to the person of Jesus. However, they have a distrust, and even a dislike, for the church which is quick to tell them what they don't know or have gotten wrong about God, before, if ever, asking about their experience of God. No wonder they see church as an impediment in their search for God. Pope Benedict, unfortunately, didn't give us any help in that area last week when he reinforced the stereotype by proclaiming that all church groups except his own are not true churches and are defective – the Orthodox because they do not recognize him as the head of the church, and Protestants because we cannot prove apostolic succession from Peter as Catholics can. Christ only established one church, the Pope said, and -- isn't Benedict lucky – it just happens to be his.

Sister Joan Chittister, whose opinions probably keep Pope Benedict up at night, writes that religions are meant to be systems that lead us to the divine. Religion, she says, gives us structure, tradition, creeds, definitions, discipline, and habits which are all essential to faith, but sometimes those very things may restrict us, prevent movement, and inhibit the growth of our faith. And when that happens, “we risk unintentionally worshipping our particular brand of organized religion rather than the God who is supposed to be the focus of that religion.” “God,” she says, “is always greater than religion.”³

I'm going to go out on a limb here and respond to Pope Benedict's assertion about the one true church, by saying I don't think Jesus' primary purpose on this earth was to establish a

church at all, but instead was to show us by the way he lived his life how we can come to know God better. Those who followed Jesus called their movement “the way,” and on the “way” they tried to imitate him and to live as he lived. And when Jesus said “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me,” I am convinced that he meant that to know God, to come close to God, we have to live as Jesus lived, we have to know the Jesus truth, and live the Jesus way, in order to have the Jesus life. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, with a twinge of sadness and regret in her book *Leaving Church*, that Jesus lived and died “with such authentic faith in God that he gave his followers the courage to do the same thing. For obvious reasons, they could not sustain this alarming freedom for long, so they turned the faith of Jesus into the religion about Jesus and the rest is history. . . . Jesus preached the coming of the kingdom, but it was the church that came.”⁴

Obviously as a person who has grown up in the church and is now an ordained clergy person in the church, I’m not advocating getting rid of the church! I love the church, especially the United Methodist church. I appreciate our denomination, particularly, for the freedom it gives us to explore and to question and wonder, and to hold understandings different from one another. What I want to advocate today is what I hope I understand Jesus to have been advocating in this parable is this: We are all on a journey towards Jerusalem – the city of Zion – the kingdom of God. And as we journey we will experience things that may conflict with what we’ve always been taught, or have always believed to be true, that may make us see things in a different light, or understand things in a different way. And at that point we have a choice – either to ignore or shy away from what is before us or to explore the possibilities – examine what we’ve always known and assumed and put it up against what we’re currently experiencing. Perhaps we will be moved with compassion – the Greek word that we translate as “compassion,” literally means “to feel in the bowels” – and if we have a gut feeling, then maybe that’s the Holy Spirit moving us into new territory.

Father Thomas Keating, another writer who may also cause the Pope sleepless nights, says “the only thing we can be sure of in [our] spiritual journey is that whatever we are expecting to happen will not happen. God is not bound by our ideas.”⁵

What must we do to inherit eternal life? For me it is to be always thankful for and mindful of the traditions that have shaped me, but also to be open to recognize the otherness of God who is always ahead of us, freely moving in surprising, unexpected, and often unorthodox ways so that I must also be receptive to the activity of the Holy Spirit, pay attention to my gut feelings, keep an open mind, and continue to ask questions. And if I do that, who knows, I might come to know more than just the right answers, I might even come to know God. Amen.

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¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching*, Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990, p. 150.

² Tom Long, “Meeting the Good Samaritan,” Day 1, July 15, 2007

³ Joan Chittister, *Called to Question*, Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, 2004, p. 21

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*, San Francisco: Harper, 2006, p. 220.

⁵ Thomas Keating, *Foundations for Centering Prayer and the Contemplative Life*, New York: Continuum, 2004, p. 212.