

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
15th Sunday of Ordinary Time
July 15, 2001

“Do This, and You Will Live”
Luke 10:25-37

It's a strange question: “What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?”
It doesn't make sense, really.
There's not much any of us can *do* to get an inheritance.
If there was something I could do to get an inheritance from, say, Bill Gates,
I'd be doing it!
But an inheritance is a gift, and who gets it is up to the giver.

Still the lawyer who approaches Jesus in the Gospel of Luke asks,
“What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?”,
Luke tells us he asks this strange question
NOT because he has come to sit at Jesus' feet and learn
BUT to test Jesus, to gain an advantage over Jesus.
He wants to put Jesus in his place.
Knock him down a few notches in the eyes of the public.

Even so, Jesus has an answer for this man,
actually, a question:
He asks him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”
An elementary question for an expert in the law,
so the lawyer easily quotes from Deuteronomy and Leviticus:
“You shall love the Lord your God, and your neighbor as yourself.”
To which Jesus says, “You have given the right answer.
Do this, and you will live.”
The exchange might have ended here. But the lawyer is not satisfied.
He feels the need to justify himself, though I'm not sure why.
Is he embarrassed by his first question,
which Jesus made him answer for himself?
Does he want to look smarter
by raising another more complex question?
Or is he just trying to avoid the directness of Jesus answer?
Jesus direction “Do this, and you will live”
doesn't leave much wiggle room.

Whatever the reason, the lawyer feels the need to justify himself,
so he asks Jesus “And who is my neighbor?”
And Jesus, being Jesus, begins to tell a story.

A man is lying between a dumpster and a brick wall,
mugged, beaten up, stripped of his valuables, and left for dead.
He's visible from the city sidewalk.
Jesus doesn't say who he is. He could be anybody.
The only thing we know is that he's in critical condition.

Now by chance, the city mayor walks by on his way to a meeting
a meeting on the reduction of the city crime rate.
It really is an important meeting,
addressing the problems of government policy and a social system
that produces criminals.
He really doesn't have time to help this man.
So he passes by on the other side of the sidewalk.

So likewise, a Presbyterian minister walks by
on her way to the hospital.
She has a family to visit whose mother is near death.
They really need her to be there.
She can't meet all the needs in the world.
So she passes by on the other side of the sidewalk.

But then a third pedestrian comes walking by.
And when he sees the man, he is moved with pity.
He lifts him up, hoists his body over his shoulder and carries him to his car.
He wraps the man's bloody arm and head with the dry-cleaned shirts
hanging in the back.
He drives him to the hospital emergency room,
calls in to work and asks for a day of unpaid leave.
He stays with the man in the hospital the rest of the day.

Which of these three, Jesus asks,
do you think was a neighbor to the man behind the dumpster?
Again, the lawyer gets it right, "The one who showed him mercy."

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This story Jesus told
has become one of the most well-known of any in the Bible.
It has captured the imagination of poets and painters,
preachers and church-goers, and even thoroughly secular people
down through the centuries
and has provided us with one of our dearest images of neighborliness.
Who doesn't know what it means to be A Good Samaritan?
Even people who have never hear the story Jesus told,
probably know that being a Good Samaritan means being a person
who helps a neighbor in need.

On Thursday night last week,
I spent some time with a wonderful group of people
from this congregation.
I listened as the group shared about what Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
has meant to them over the years.
I heard stories about people helping people
through times of illness, times of transition,
through houses burning down, and loved ones dying,

and young people trying to find their way in the world.
I heard stories about people whose lives were touched and changed
because someone in their life
chose not to pass by on the other side of the road,
but chose instead to be a neighbor, and to draw near.

You know the basic meaning of the word neighbor,
whether in English, Greek, or Hebrew,
is "to be near" -- One who is near.

Jesus says, "Do this! Love your neighbor.

Be near to those in need
and you will live."

Even if you can't do much to relieve your neighbors' pain
even if you can't change his troubled circumstance
even if you don't know quite what to say to her,

Go be near to your neighbor.

And in your nearness, God will draw near.

The kingdom of God will draw near.

And you will live.

* * * * *

But there's more to this story than the admonition to be a good neighbor.

Unfortunately,

our familiarity with this story has also become an obstacle to hearing it.

We've become so acquainted with the Good Samaritan,

that the story has lost its punch.

(Actually, in the gospel story, the Samaritan is never called "good".)

We've lost touch with just how disturbing it would have been to the lawyer

that this man who showed mercy, whom Jesus lifts up as an example,

was a Samaritan.

When Jesus asks, the lawyer cannot even bring himself to acknowledge

that the man is a Samaritan.

He just calls him, "the one who showed him mercy."

To a Jew, the mere notion of a "Good" Samaritan would have been a joke.

The people of Samaria were Jews who has intermarried with other races.

They had even on occasion teamed up with Israel's enemies

against God's people.

Some Jews would go miles out of their way to avoid

walking through Samaritan territory.

A Samaritan helping a Jew in the first century would be like

an African American helping a member of the Ku Klux Klan,

or a welfare recipient helping someone who drives a Lexus,

or a Palestinian refugee today helping an Israeli soldier

or, perhaps,

a gay rights activist helping an editor of the Presbyterian Layman.

Most Jews in Jesus day would have been so irritated,

so disturbed, even enraged

at the thought of a despised Samaritan doing something good,

that they may not even have been able to hear the rest of Jesus story,
much less live by it.

Jesus' story shakes up our categories
and forces us to look in unexpected places for the kingdom of God.
Jesus' story makes it possible that we might even learn something
about the kingdom of God,
from people who've never darkened the door of the church.
Jesus' story gets us so disoriented,
that we're not sure with whom we most identify.
I want to be the Good Samaritan,
but Jesus has made it so that the Good Samaritan
might be the one I most despise.
I'm afraid I might be most like the priest and the Levite
the city mayor and the Presbyterian minister,
who have to choose between duty and duty,
between one good deed and another,
but still somehow fall short of the kingdom.

Or maybe, for most of us,
we find ourselves lying face down with the man in the ditch.
We are the ones who are beaten down and left for dead,
but at the moment of our desperation
we feel the strong and gentle hands of love
lifting us up, wrapping our wounds,
helping us find a place to rest and recover.
Perhaps this is the place we have to start
if we want to learn to love our neighbor as ourselves.
We start by seeing how we've been in the ditch,
by remembering the dirty grime of our own gutter,
and how Jesus has lifted us up with his amazing grace
and given us a new beginning in life.

If you're spending all your time and energy, like this lawyer,
trying to justify your existence
talking about love rather than doing it,
then hear the good news.
Jesus has justified your existence.
Jesus has lifted you up, and healed you,
and has brought you mercifully
into the household of God.

No go and do likewise for your neighbor. Go be near the one in need.
Even if he's the one you like the least. Even if she's the one you most despise.
Do this, and you will live.
Amen.