

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 11, 2010
Pentecost 7
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Deuteronomy 30:6-14
Psalm 25
Colossians 1:1-14
Luke 10:25-37

Our collect for today summarizes the essential thrust of our Scripture lessons as it states: “grant that your people may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them.”

Our Scripture lessons illuminate this twofold concern to *know* God’s will and to *do* it. They show us what it is that God asks of us, and they reveal the promise of God’s grace as our source of power to be able to live like God asks us to live.

The answer to the first question, “what are we to do?” Is summarized by Jesus in his discussion with the expert in religious law. Jesus asks him what the law of Moses says, and he replies: “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself.” (Lk. 10:27)

This, then, is what the Scriptures ask of us. This is the revealed will and plan of God for his people. If you wanted to reduce the essential claim of Scripture on all those who read it to one simple sentence, it could be this: *love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself.* In the words of our liturgy, “on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Now the religious expert with whom Jesus speaks does not pull this from thin air. It goes back to Deuteronomy 6:4-6, that famous portion of the law known as the *Shema*, where God (through Moses) commands the people to love him wholeheartedly in response to his great love for them. This command is echoed in our lesson today from Deuteronomy 30, as Moses is once again calling for complete obedience on the part of the people.

Now it is one thing to hear this injunction to love God and neighbor. But how do we actually *do* it?

John Wesley had a belief that when God commands something in Scripture, behind that command is a promise of grace to help us fulfill the command and live like God desires. In other words, the ability to love God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself is not merely an ideal target at which we aim but never hit. It is a gift of God's grace and comes from a process of inner transformation and renewal.

This kind of inner renewal is part of what the Psalmist and the apostle Paul are speaking about today as well, especially as they focus on the process of teaching and instruction in the ways of God.

So then, the Scriptures command us to love God and neighbor, and God gives grace to actually help us to do so. But what does life look like when we do it?

One answer to that is the story of the “Good Samaritan” in our Gospel lesson.

Now to those listening to Jesus, the title “Good Samaritan” would have been a misnomer. The Samaritans were a mixed race of people tracing their descendants to those who occupied the land of Israel following the conquest by Assyria in 722 B.C. They opposed rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, and constructed their own place of worship on Mt. Gerazim.

Samaritans were considered to be ceremonially unclean, social outcasts, and religious heretics. The last term Jesus’ audience would use to describe a Samaritan was the term “good.” No doubt, then, this story must have had some serious “shock value” to its first audience.

Perhaps for the story to have comparable shock value for us, we need to replace the word “Samaritan” with comparable contemporary groups of people we might be tempted to disdain today. Let’s read part of the story again and try a few on for size:

“A Jewish man was traveling on a trip from Jerusalem to Jericho and was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes and money, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road.

By chance a Jewish priest came along; but when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by.

A temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side.

Then a despised radical Muslim came along...
Then a despised liberal Democrat came along...
Then a despised fundamentalist came along...

It is easy for us to wag our fingers at the priest and the Levite in this story, to scold them for their behavior. But we need not demonize these two men in order for the story to have its power.

In fact, a case can be made that these two men had reasons for *not* stopping to help the injured man. Their behavior is appalling to us, but it was not without reasons.

For one, the injured man along the road could have been a “plant” or a decoy used by thieves to trap unsuspecting travelers and rob them.

Not only that, but the Scriptures forbade these men to come into contact with a dead corpse, because that would disqualify them from their temple duties. To the extent that the priest and Levite thought this man might be dead, that would also be just cause *not* to stop.

Please don't misunderstand. I'm not saying that the priest and Levite were behaving properly. I'm simply saying that they may not have been as cold and callous as we make them out to be. Passing by this injured man presented them

with a choice between duty and *duty*. Who of us has not faced a similar situation at some point in our lives?

And that's precisely my point. If we ask who we are in this story, we are much closer to the priest and Levite than the Samaritan. (If you don't agree, just try to convince me that you are a social outcast and religious heretic.)

Perhaps most importantly, we should notice that Jesus does not answer the religious man's question, "who is my neighbor?" At least not directly.

Instead, what does Jesus do? Jesus tells this young man to *be a neighbor*, to love others impartially and to expect nothing in return.

And so it is with us. I should not be asking, "who is my neighbor?" Instead, I should be busy *being* a neighbor. If I have to ask "who is my neighbor?" then I don't understand what Jesus is saying here just yet.

As I thought about Jesus' words this week, I had to confess that there are some people in this world that I would prefer to *pity* or even *hate* rather than to love. And a part of me said to Jesus, "Lord, what you're asking is simply too hard for me. It's out of reach. It's a nice ideal, but we live in a real world."

Then these words from Deuteronomy came to me:

"this command I am giving you today is not too difficult for you to understand or perform. It is not up in heaven, so distant that you must ask, 'who will go to heaven and bring it down so we can hear and obey it?' Is it not beyond the sea, so far away that you must ask, 'who will cross the sea to bring it to us so we can hear it and obey it?'"

The message is very close at hand; it is on your lips and in your heart so that you can obey it.”

If God commands something of us, he also promises grace to help us. As we come to the Table this morning, I invite you to do two things.

First, if you haven't already done so, tell the Lord that you relinquish the prerogative of deciding *who* your neighbor is, and allow him simply to help you to *be* a neighbor.

Second, come with gratitude in your heart, knowing that when God asks something of you, he gives you grace and power to do it.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.