



The Westminster Pulpit

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“Who is my neighbor?” **Sermon on Luke 10:25-37**

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The Lord is MY shepherd. Personal faith. MY shepherd.

There is something to be said for knowing you have a God. There is something to be said for being able to dial up God at any time by just saying a prayer. There is something to be said for not being in control: “He leads me beside the still water.”

Faith needs to take hold within the individual. When we baptize a child, it is our hope, prayer, and pledge to guide and to nurture the little one “to know” Jesus. The hope is to love God with all your heart, mind, strength, and soul.”

And while all this is important – personal faith – we know faith is more than a personal relationship between the Creator and the created—much more.

Luke 10:25-37

²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” ²⁷He answered, “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.” ²⁸And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” ²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

³⁰Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while

traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

What we do here is practice our faith. Faith is, well, faith. There is no proof for it. We believe it. That makes having faith a challenging thing.

For example, one of the things we believe is that everyone is made in the image of God. It's one of the things we believe. Now, look around this room. Can you believe God looks like that? Thinks like that? Lives like that? I'm telling you, it's not easy to believe that everyone is made in the image of God. If you think it is easy to believe, you really need to become more involved in the church. There's a reason for my gray hair, "Bless your hearts."

After church, we should all stand around the sanctuary and look at each other eye to eye and say, "You are made in the image of God." And then take the words out the door, and into the next argument that you have. Let the first words out of your mouth be, "You are made in the image of God." Practicing faith is hard.

Easy! Easy would be for each one of us to say, "God is made in the image of me."

I think that's the preference the world over. "God aligns to the way I live and move and have my being." God matches my furniture. God endorses my political viewpoint. God approves of how environmentally conscious I am, as I board a jet to travel here, there, and everywhere. God approves of how invested I am in helping those in need. I gave twenty dollars just the other day to help the world. And while my talk is louder, God approves of my personal financial investment in the needs of the world. I like my God. How about you?

What I am saying is, "It is easy to stand up and say what we believe." Preaching is easy. The words just roll off the lips. Going to church is easy. We can look the part, pray the part, sing the part, and that is why Jesus tore the temple apart.

Fashioning a whip, toppling over the tables, his anger was that God's house had become a theater. Everyone is an actor. They all played the part of looking pious. They all had rehearsed the words, "I love my God with all my heart, mind, and soul." Saying the words, but not living out the Word. They were actors, being mean, stealing, hating out in the world, and then coming into worship all pious. And Jesus said, "You have turned God's house into a den, a sanctuary, for robbers." He was angry about it.

If God is made in your image, the easiest thing to do is to love God. We practice it well. The more difficult practice of faith is to love your neighbor as much as you love yourself, as much as you love your own image of God.

How are you doing with that? I'm going to pause and let you answer this question in your head: "How am I doing in loving my neighbor?" Give yourself a rating from one to ten, ten being the highest. So, "How am I doing in loving my neighbor?" Give it some thought.

I think what I like best about our text for today is that when it came to the word “neighbor,” the lawyer asked Jesus for the fine print. Whis is my neighbor? That’s the fine print. As my lawyer friend used to say to me, “Donovan, the big print giveth and the fine print taketh away.”

The lawyer wanted fine print: “And who is my neighbor?” The fine print!

Are my neighbors those in my neighborhood? All those people who share my standard of living? Are those my neighbors? They’re pretty easy to love, although I do have a neighbor whose leaves fall from their tree, and all get sucked into my garage. He watches as I blow them out, but I love my neighbor. I’ve got a neighbor named John Bailey. Practicing faith is hard! But I love John Bailey!

Can I have the fine print? Is my neighbor the one who doesn’t vote like me? Well, if that’s so, it’s going to ruin my Thanksgiving dinner. Isn’t it?

Maybe my neighbor is simply the next person I see. I think that’s a great way to look at it. Mark Twain said, “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness.” Go travel, and the next person you see is your neighbor. But there’s something to be said for the neighbor you cannot see, and there are a lot of those. A lot of neighbors are suffering. What do you do about that? What do you do? What do you do... for those who are suffering, and you know they’re suffering.

“Who is my neighbor?” The lawyer, it says, “wanted to justify himself” with that question. He wanted to make sure he had it right!

In the parable, the Priest and the Levite surely had some fine print. There was one who was suffering; they both saw him. They didn’t lift a finger. I’m sure they were justified in not helping. Very lawful reasons for not helping. Digging up some fine print in Leviticus. Leviticus is a real go-to book of the Bible that can bail you out of some difficult situations. “Look, I’d like to help, I surely would, but I cannot soil my clothing on the way to worship.”

I’m amazed at how people are using scripture to justify the way they live and move and have their being! Pulling out scripture willy-nilly. But there is one scripture that is the highest card in the deck. It trumps all others. “You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, strength, and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself.” We are to look at all things through that lens. And that is the scripture that Jesus said that brings eternal life not just for you...but for everyone.

The eternal is more than time. Eternal is beautiful. It lasts forever.

I’ve had these stories in my head this week. The story of the father who paddles out in a kayak in that water to rescue his girls. And his girls text back their final words, “We love you.” A young woman saving her family, and as she saves them, she lets go and sings hymns all the way down the river to her death. Things come and go - floods, fires. They come and go. But the eternal, the beautiful – that just sticks with you. It lasts.

Note this parable isn’t called the parable of “The Priest and the Levite.” It’s not a parable about doing things by the book and having your limits. It’s okay. It just isn’t beautiful.

No, this is the parable of the good Samaritan as if it were a surprise - "Samaritan, good? Who would have thought?" Jews didn't like Samaritans. Samaritans didn't like Jews.

Jesus even said, "It's not right to take the children's food and feed it to the dogs." He was talking to a Samaritan woman who just wanted her daughter to be healed. "We can't give you that, it's for the dog! You're a dog!" And that woman convinced Jesus when she said, "I'm made in the image of God!" Jesus changed his mind. This is acceptable. You can do anything you want to the one you call a dog. You can do anything you want to the one you demonize.

But as I said, we know this parable to be about the eternal life, the beautiful!

It tugs at the heartstrings. The one who has all the fine print in the world not to help is the one who goes all in. Loves the one on the side of the road with all his heart, mind, strength, and soul. Not just binds the wounds. Not just lifting him up on his animal. Not just paying the Innkeeper for the room, he empties himself for a stranger. He's all in to mercy.

And mercy can be defined by this word: healing. Lord have mercy; Lord have healing.

Healing is that moment where life gets better. After surgery, life gets better, "I'm starting to heal." I remember when I fell off my bike, skinned my knee, cried, and ran in to see my mother. You know what she did? She kissed my knee and that's when healing began. Mothers have something in their saliva. No, they have something in their heart that's able to reach down all in and wants to take that pain away. Healing is that moment when life gets better.

We live in a day when we think it's our responsibility to cut, to bruise, to hurt; that's the word out there. But you know the Word of God. You know what's beautiful. So, make your life about the eternal. Bring healing. Bring mercy. Open your heart. Give more money. Lift up those who are broken. Give your life. And that's what it means to practice our faith. It's hard.

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