

### **“True Neighbours” – Luke 10:25-37 – July 14/13**

I’ve slowly discovered – a bit to my surprise – that I enjoy taking courses. Not so much for the process of taking the course as for the introduction to some new concepts and ideas. My surprise comes from the fact that I was – and still am – a terrible student! It took a long, long time for me to adjust to the trauma of discovering after my first day at school that I would have to go back. “Whaddya mean, I have to go back tomorrow?!” was my pained cry. “You mean ‘every day’?!” was my anguished wail when my mother pointed out the facts of school life.

As it turned out school wasn’t too bad at first as I really didn’t have to work at it. I could pick up what I needed to know to do ‘OK’ on tests just from listening in class, and it wasn’t until I was in Grade 11 that I actually had to start reading books and doing homework. I have to admit that I was bored to tears most of the time, and that was probably the main cause of my being a discipline problem in class. You know the annoying kind of student I was ... second row from the window, second-last seat in the row, always with the smart-alecky comments. Occasionally I would ask a question not only to show that I was present in class and awake but more likely to show how smart I [thought I] was.

You know the kind of question, one much like the one the lawyer asked Jesus in our gospel text. The lawyer, who in standing up displayed a sign of arrogance, a claim that he considered himself at least as smart as the teacher, asked the same kind of question I used to get shot down with. The “too clever” question, the question that was meant to show that the one asking the question already knew the answer. The kind of question that the really talented teachers would turn back on me, and I would go down in flames, or at the very least suffer significant embarrassment.

Jesus was that kind of talented teacher, wasn’t he, as he magnificently handled the lawyer who posed the smart-aleck question! In classic rabbinical tradition, Jesus responds to the lawyer’s question with another question, namely, “what does scripture have to say?”, and in doing so presents the lawyer with two choices; either he reveals that he doesn’t know the answer, which would probably be too much for him to admit even if it were true, or he is forced to show that he already knows the answer, thus revealing that it was a loaded, smart-aleck question in the first place. The lawyer takes the bold route, and proudly shows that he knows what scripture has to say on the subject, quoting from both Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, “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 neighbour as yourself”. Without any fuss, Jesus, like the most talented teacher, acknowledged how clever the lawyer was, and then turned the subject back on him with a huge challenge. “Good answer”, Jesus replied, “now go do it!”

Now, if the lawyer had been half as clever as he thought he was, if he had been gracious enough to realize he’d just been caught and revealed as a smart-aleck in public, he’d have backed off at that moment. It took me a while to learn it, but I eventually caught on that the best thing to do when I was caught in similar embarrassing situations was to say, “thanks”, and sit down and shut up. But not this fellow. Oh no. Undeterred, “wanting to justify himself” as the text puts it, he unleashed his mouth, opened it wide enough to put both feet in, and pressed on. “And who is my neighbour?” he asks Jesus. You can almost hear the self-satisfied smirk come off the page with that question, can’t you? You can almost hear the lawyer muttering contentedly to himself about Jesus, “got you in a corner now, don’t I?”

Once again, Jesus responds to the question with a question. It’s a bit of a trick question, because it in turn not only boxes the lawyer into a very explicit logical corner, but also reveals with great clarity the depth and breadth of God’s love and acceptance. At the same time Jesus’

question points out with precision how the legalistic accuracy of the lawyer's approach to faith falls short of the criteria for eternal life that he though he knew so well.

But Jesus doesn't pose that final telling question out of the blue. He puts before the lawyer a preamble in the form of a story, the well-familiar "parable of the good Samaritan". I think most people are familiar with this parable, at least the basic details, in which a man is robbed, beaten and left for dead on the road; how a priest and a Levite (a lawyer) both avoided coming to help him, afraid in their deep faith of being contaminated; and of how a foreigner, a Samaritan, stepped up to the plate, and helped the man with assistance that would be best called "above and beyond the call of duty". There's not much more to say about such a familiar parable other than to re-emphasize just how offensive the Samaritan would have been to both the priest and the Levite, and indeed to the smart-aleck lawyer.

The Samaritans were the 'mixed' descendants of former Jews and immigrants who had been relocated into the area by the conquering Assyrians, kind of like unwanted cousins. They might have been more acceptable to the Jews of Judea and Jerusalem if they had been total foreigners instead of being able to claim some kind of connection beyond political. The Samaritans hadn't been particularly supportive or cooperative about the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem after the Babylonians had trashed it, and the resentments ran deep. We can recognize the tensions among these groups because those resentments and tensions still run very deep in that part of the world.

In presenting this familiar parable to the lawyer and to us, Jesus opens the door to a broader and more graceful understanding of how wide and how encompassing and how inclusive God's love is. Where the lawyer was trying to find a definition that would clearly specify and thereby limit who was deserving of the kind of love being called for in the scripture texts he quoted, Jesus provided with divine clarity in his response a model of inclusiveness that defined neighbour as someone well outside of the narrow and limited lawyer's scope. By Jesus' – and thus God's – definition, the real neighbour was the one demonstrating the kind of love shown by the Samaritan towards a Jew.

It seems like we are ever increasingly in a time when this teaching, this model of the ideal neighbour, needs desperately to be heard and more so incorporated and lived by our whole world. Tragic shootings this week in the United States in Louisiana, Minnesota, and Texas all underscore a deepening division between people who would in other ways consider themselves neighbours. Animosity is evermore being fueled by politics of division, by fostering of fears, by media mania, and by magnifying the 'otherness' of people who do not look like 'us' in a mirror. Racial differences, cultural differences, religious differences are all being hyped to serve venal personal interests instead of being bridged with understanding that we are all neighbours, not only locally but also globally. Enhanced communication and transportation increasingly shorten the physical and economic distances between us, impinging forcefully upon our innate senses of isolation and tribalism – both of which evolved as means of protection but which now form the ultimate dangers to all of civilization.

We are reminded – gently but forcibly – from this encounter between Jesus and the lawyer that the ultimate goals of peace, reconciliation with God (recall that the discussion started with the honest question of "what must I do to inherit eternal life?") and real meaning in life start with and blossom from loving God and loving one's neighbour ... but with a broadened definition of neighbour that includes all people. "Love mercy and do justice" is another way Jesus put it ... and do we need to be reminded that 'mercy' in his understanding was not an exemption from some rules but rather an active form of showing loving compassion, of

providing real relief from oppression, be it political, social, economic, or especially religious? And that 'justice' in Jesus' understanding involves fairness and equality to result in the same kinds of reliefs?

"Just do it", Jesus said, but it's so hard sometimes to put that kind of love into practice. To begin, exactly what is it that we are to do? I'd love to be able to come up with a list but that would be the opposite of that to which this parable is calling us ... to compassion instead of rules; to loving involvement instead of dispassionate indifference to the plight of others; to be willing to look at ourselves with integrity to see where and how we are part of the oppressions Jesus rails against. The task to which we are called is difficult because we have to first understand with clarity our values and that is so often a very painful exercise because often our real values are at significant odds with what we proclaim them to be. Adjusting our values to correspond to those we understand Christ promoting often calls for changes we find fearful. When we adjust our values to match what we understand to be what God prefers then we need to translate those values into actions – values and actions that Christ modeled for us: grace, mercy, compassion, dedication, peacefulness, and love. By this parable and all else that Christ exhibited in his life, death, and resurrection we are invited to incorporate those very values so much into our lives that our reactions to individual situations of need are automatic, like those of the Samaritan.

Yes, it can be and is often difficult to live out the love that Christ calls us to exhibit in our daily living, but by the grace and love of God that we are able to learn to do so, and thus be able to claim the gifts promised by him ... gifts of mercy, of peace, of life abundant and life everlasting, through Christ our Lord.