

“Enough Data” – Luke 10:25-37 – July 11/04

I’m starting to get excited at the prospect of going back to school! As I mentioned last week, I’m in the process of applying to VST to enter the Doctor of Ministry program, and while nothing in life is certain, it looks as if I will be admitted. That I am applying to go to school would surprise many of my former classmates, especially from High School. That I am excited about it would make them think I’ve gone crazy!

My early school career was not a distinguished one. 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.

It 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. Sometimes I would ask a question just to show that I was not only present in class and awake, but to show how smart I [thought I] was.

You know the kind of question, just like the one the lawyer asked Jesus. 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 some embarrassment.

Jesus was that kind of talented teacher, wasn’t he? He handled the lawyer with the smart-aleck question beautifully! 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 and at the same time 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 thought he knew so well. There is a long preamble to the question, a story, the well-familiar “parable of the good Samaritan”. I think most people are familiar with this parable, at least the overview, 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. When the Assyrians had conquered the northern part of Israel in 722BC, they followed their usual practice of removing almost all of the former inhabitants and dispersing them throughout their vast empire, and replacing them with other likewise conquered peoples (with the Assyrians, it was hard to find an answer to the age-old question of which came first, “divide and conquer” or “conquer and divide”!). It didn’t do the Assyrians much good, for they soon afterwards faded as a world super-power (there’s a lesson there for modern politicians!) and what had been the Northern Kingdom of Israel was left pretty much to itself. Of course, Samaria was a part of that area, and so the Samaritans were the ‘mixed’ descendants of former Jews and the forced immigrants, 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. They 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. Perhaps we can begin to understand the reaction of the priest, the Levite, and even the lawyer if we think in terms of an American from an exclusive white suburb being broken down on the Interstate and being helped by a gang of young blacks from the ‘hood in a bouncing jumper-car; or perhaps a similar situation of a dowager from Kerrisdale being assisted by a group of teens from the Musqueam Nation.

In any event, the meaning of the parable is clear as a bell to us, to anyone who hears it, and even to the smart-aleck religious lawyer trying to test Jesus. The true neighbour, as seen by God’s definition, is the Samaritan who stops to help, to put faith into loving action. The message is clear. We have enough data on what it is that God wants us to do, we don’t need any more. Many times we get into a “paralysis by analysis” situation where we follow a seemingly endless need or desire to keep collecting data, to keep analyzing the situation instead of just getting down to fixing it. Jesus’ final answer to the lawyer could have well been the inspiration for the Nike advertising catchphrase: “Just do it!” “You’ve got enough data, you understand clearly”, Jesus challenges the lawyer, and us. “Go and do likewise”. “Just do it!”

Easier said than done, though, isn’t it? We love to stall, to find ways to assess the situation, to analyze the variables, to wonder what to do. And yet we agree so completely with the lawyer’s definition of what God calls us to do in response for the gift of eternal life. We even understand the message of this parable so clearly. There’s no argument that can defend the reluctance of either the priest or the Levite to step in and display love of neighbour so clearly needed, and nothing but praise for the foreigner, of all people, who did help. We can only nod in understanding and agreement. We have all the data and knowledge and understanding that we need.

“Just do it”, Jesus said, but it’s so hard sometimes to put that kind of love into practice. Those times are the very times we need to understand that Jesus is the one who lived out that very practice, helping us when we are beat up by life or even by ourselves. The very times when we need to be honest enough to admit that even though our understanding may be perfect, our practice cannot be, and that it is only by the overwhelming grace and love of God that we are both offered and able to claim the gifts promised by him. Gifts of mercy, of peace, of life abundant and life everlasting, through Christ our Lord.