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# 8<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

JULY 14, 2013

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## WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

Pastor Jim Dunn

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### Luke 10:25-37

#### The Parable of the Good Samaritan

**25** And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" **26** He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" **27** And he 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." **28** And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."

**29** But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" **30** Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.

**31** Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. **32** So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. **33** But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. **34** He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. **35** And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' **36** Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" **37** He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."

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Michael Patterson was a good neighbor. In May, he helped rescue a truck driver from a burning tractor-trailer rig. Two weeks later, a four-year-old girl stepped in the wrong place in a Georgia Creek. She was pulled under by deep, rushing water. Michael Patterson and his nine-year-old son saw it... and Michael dove in after her.

What Michael didn't know was that the water was only six feet deep where he dove. He hit his head on the bottom, breaking his neck in three places, severing his spine, and somehow was still able to push the little girl to the surface. Both the little girl and Michael Patterson survived the ordeal, but Michael was left paralyzed. Two weeks ago, he died as a result of his injuries.

Now, I called him a good neighbor even though the two people he rescued did not actually live next door to him or even down the block. Actually they were complete strangers to him. That's okay. Jesus would still call him a good neighbor. Now, we've been taught in the church that my neighbor is anyone who needs my help. Is my neighbor the person who helps me? I doubt Michael Patterson thought about what he'd been taught in Sunday school as he saw the little girl drowning. I don't think he analyzed the situation that closely. I don't think he asked himself, "Is that little girl my neighbor?"

Leave it to lawyers and politicians and theologians to analyze such things. Like the lawyer who thought this question was complicated enough he asked it of Jesus Himself. A lawyer, the kind of law he was expert in was the Law of Moses. It was his job to interpret the Law of Moses the way a lawyer today might be asked to interpret the US Constitution. Experts in the Law of Moses made a career out of analyzing questions just like this one: "And who is my neighbor?"

But that wasn't the first question he asked Jesus. He was led to ask that question because of the answer he received to another question: "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus turned the question back on the lawyer. “Well, you’re the expert. How would you answer that question yourself?” The law expert answered, quoting right from the law written in Deuteronomy and Leviticus: “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.” Jesus said okay, *do that*, and you will live.

The conversation might have ended right there. But the lawyer felt compelled to ask one more question. Did he now ask Jesus: how then can I inherit eternal life, for I do not always love God or my neighbor? No, instead he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

My brothers and sisters, can you hear the wheels turning in this lawyer’s head? Analyzing, thinking, rationalizing? The Gospel writer comments on this. Luke says this lawyer “wanted to justify himself.” In other words, he was thinking that he did what was right. He sought justice. He treated others fairly, as long as they were of the house of Israel. Anyone else was not his neighbor.

At present, our politicians are analyzing what is our nation’s responsibility to those who are not Americans living here illegally. Haven’t we as a nation done more than what is right and just and fair for those who aren’t even real Americans? This expert in the law had analyzed what the law required. And according to his analysis, he had done what the law required regarding his neighbor. He wanted to make that clear. But why? Who said he wasn’t a righteous man?

Jesus didn’t condemn him. Jesus just told him to go and live out the answer he had given. But the lawyer couldn’t let it go, because he knew God intended for His people to respond to need – not with analysis but with our hearts. To *love* our neighbor, to show mercy as we would want to be shown mercy, to not merely do what is right, but to do what is merciful and to respond to those who are drowning, whether in deep waters or in deep poverty, not with our heads but with our hearts. So, then how have we done with answering that question for ourselves, “Who is my neighbor?”

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Jesus answered that question. He told a story about a man going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. It's a 15-mile stretch of road. In Bible times, it was called *Adummim*. Today, it's referred to as *Tala at-ed-Dumm*. Either way, it means Ascent of Blood. A traveler's blood is shed in Jesus' story. He falls among robbers, who leave him half dead. The priests and their assistants, the Levites, who worked at the Temple in Jerusalem when it was their turn, often used the same road. It is believed that as many as 12,000 priests lived in Jericho in those days.

Well, a priest and a Levite are traveling on the Ascent of Blood, leaving Jerusalem and heading for Jericho. Each, in turn, sees the half-dead traveler and passes by on the other side.

Brothers and sisters, can you hear the wheels turning in their heads? If I stop to help, will I put myself in danger? How much will it cost? How much time will it take? Will I render myself unclean? What will I tell them when I get home? Did he get himself into this predicament? Was it his own fault? Is he of the house of Israel? What does the law say I must do? But when the Samaritan sees the half-dead traveler, he responds with his heart. In the words of Jesus: "And when he saw him, he had compassion." The word translated as "compassion," *splagchnizomai*, means literally "to feel deeply in one's gut." Not in one's head, but in one's heart.

Interestingly, this very word is never used in the New Testament of anyone except of Jesus. It is Jesus who shows mercy. Towards people like us who tend to respond to need with our heads instead of our hearts, Jesus shows mercy.

Jesus would say to us what He would have said to the lawyer: "You are not the priest in the story or the Levite. Nor are you the Samaritan. I am the Samaritan." Jesus was the Samaritan. Jesus was treated by the leaders of Israel and by our sins like a Samaritan, rejected and unwanted. He came to us anyway and bound up our wounds, our hurts, pouring on us the oil of gladness and the wine of His own precious cleansing blood. He did this knowing exactly what would happen to Him.

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When Michael Patterson dove into that Georgia creek to rescue Javea Jones, he had no idea it was six feet deep where he dove, or he might have done something different. But Jesus knew exactly what He was doing. He knew that by showing us mercy He was putting Himself in danger and it would cost Him and it was our own fault and it would render Him unclean. And still He came to our rescue and aid. And for His sake, God is merciful to us. For Jesus' sake, God set aside what is right and just and fair. He did not treat us with fairness and justice. Hallelujah!! Instead, He showed us mercy.

Jesus would ask us the same question He asked the lawyer. "Which of these three proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among robbers?" "The one who showed him mercy," said the lawyer. Who is my neighbor? My neighbor is the one who shows me mercy. Who is my neighbor? God is – who has shown us great mercy in so many ways, especially at the cross. "You go and do likewise," Jesus says. From mercy comes mercy. From God's merciful response to us from His heart comes our own merciful response to the need of others.

Amen