

5th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 7.10.22

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

9 and the Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors,¹⁰ when you obey the Lord your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.¹¹ Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away.¹² It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?"¹³ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?"¹⁴ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

Luke 10:25-37

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"²⁷ 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 given the right answer; do this, and you will live."²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"³⁰ Jesus 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.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 while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.³⁴ He 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.³⁵ The 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."³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (517)

The boys and I went to Minnesota in April. We were there to visit where Tobias will go to school, St. Olaf in Northfield. But we spent most of our time in the Twin Cities.

I hadn't really been there before; none of the three of us had, though Jesse went to college there. Our hotel was on an outer stop of the new light rail system, near the baseball stadium. We could see the unbusy stop from our hotel window. "Let's ride the train," I said to the boys our first morning there. "That's a good way to get to know a city."

We did.

We got off for brunch, looked around for the place someone had recommended when our first attempt turned out to be closed. It took us a few blocks away from the train, and we were turned around as to how to get back. When we asked a couple of people, they weren't sure what

we meant—“Oh, the light rail?” they realized when we’d got the terminology wrong—and then they weren’t sure where it was. Like I said, it’s a new system, and the city isn’t entirely bought in yet. But they took a moment to think, to consult each other.

They gave us good directions, happily so. It’s an easy city to navigate so you don’t feel guilty asking someone for directions. In Boston, when I lived there, people would ask for directions, and you might as well have been put in the position to explain the theory of relativity. Once outside Harvard Square someone pulled up to me in their car while I was on the sidewalk. In a rush, they had tickets, “Can you tell us how to get to Symphony Hall?” “No,” I wanted to say. “I can’t tell you that. No one can. Just buy property here and settle in.”

Back on the light rail, we were nearing the stop that would have the train we were on head into St. Paul though from a stop where you could get off to get another train back to our hotel. I wanted to go to St. Paul. Tobias wanted to go to St. Paul, but only sort of. He was mostly distracted by our coming visit to St. Olaf, decision made, now to hope it was the right one. Jack wanted to go to the hotel, but with Tobias. Nearing the stop, we were no nearer to resolving who was going where.

The doors of the train opened.

Jack stepped off onto the platform. Tobias, indecisive, stayed on the train. I stood one foot on the train and one on the platform.

The doors would begin closing—willful Jack, overwhelmed Tobias, Mom in the middle.

When the doors were closing, at the last minute, I pulled my leg into the train, the doors shutting so all of Jack was outside behind the glass of the right-side door, and then in the window over the closest seat, and then in the window over the second closest seat, standing alone on the platform getting further away.

I think I can count on one hand the number of times this kid’s been on a city transit system. A few times in Boston, once or twice in New York but years ago, D.C. or, no, I think not. He’d been in our basement for the better part of two years, video-chatting all over the world, but never actually leaving his desk chair.

I took a seat beside Tobias trying to decide whether to panic.

This story of the so-called Good Samaritan is one Jesus told because a man, a lawyer, decided to test Jesus. What must he do to inherit eternal life?

Already, he was framing it wrong. He was thinking in terms of eternal life as something you get because of something you’ve done. A lawyer, he maybe was used to thinking in terms of just

desserts. And the Law itself was largely about how to live rightly, things you can do, you must do, and you must not do. Do all this right, and you will prosper. Do all this *really* right and you'll get eternal life.

And so, Jesus engaged him in this line of thinking. "You've read the law. What does it say there?"

He crystalized it exactly right: "Love God. Love your neighbor."

But there was an ambiguity there, maybe a loophole. For who's my neighbor? Whom must I love, and how do I know that? How does one suss out "the neighbor"?

First things first, though. Let's first please notice that eternal life is not, in fact, something Jesus spoke much about. According to the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, eternal life is only heard spoken of when someone else has come up to Jesus to ask about how to inherit this thing.

Eternal life: life, but more of it; life, but *far* more of it.

That's so "us," don't you think? The only thing better than a piece of chocolate cake is a *big* piece of chocolate cake. The only thing better than a nice house is a nice, *big* house. We're so predictable. Sheesh. I want this thing I already have, but *more* of it, and more than others have of it.

What Jesus *does* speak of a lot is the reign of God, the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven. And this is a thing not to be won for right behavior, as a reward, as a prize. This is a thing inherent unto itself. It is the means and the end. It is the mode and the prize. You get the kingdom of heaven by entering the kingdom of heaven, by letting it come to reign in your heart and mind, and in your doings with others. It is the dynamic of the life to come, and is at the ready in the life of this world, too. It is coming; it is here. It is already; it is not yet.

And what must you do to enter this realm?

You must love.

And how do you know whom you must love?

"A man went out..."

You must go out into the world in such a way as the one who is your neighbor is revealed to you, in such a way as the one who will be revealed as your neighbor is utterly beyond your best judgement and indeed your control. It is not necessarily the priest, suggests the story Jesus told to tease out the answer. It's not necessarily the priest, or any such obviously righteous person (a professional, a respectable member of society). It is not necessarily even the Levite, which is to say

the one most masterful of the Law, like a judge or even a justice. It might be, but it might not be. You have to open yourself up to some surprise about that.

It's funny: the people on the light rail in the middle of the workday were on an odd lot. There were more people *not* in their right minds than in their right minds. It's still a car-city, mass transit still a new idea there. And it's still cold in April there. The train was respite for people who seemed to have nowhere else to go.

The way to suss out who is your neighbor whom you are to love, Jesus suggested, is like this: a man went out, out into a world that is dangerous, out into a world where hospitality is a high value but largely because its converse is also common. The world was itself off the map. There was not much of state power to enforce laws ensuring safety beyond the city; hence the phrase "highway robbery." There were only hardly ways to communicate between regions. What hope you had not to be beset by thuggery was in your self-presentation. If you were big, if you were in a large caravan, if you were armed with things to protect yourself and to harm others, you would probably be okay. But maybe you wouldn't be. Maybe you'd come across someone bigger, some more numerous caravan. Or maybe you'd lose your way, and run out of food, run out of water. There were lots of ways to fall forgotten.

There's little said of how this man set out, though there's mention of where he set out. The road to Jericho from Jerusalem was known to be a dangerous road. The Way of the Blood, it's said to have been called.

There's also a lot said of how others were to set out. Just prior to this story, Jesus is remembered to have sent out the seventy, sent them out ahead of him so they could scout out places where they could stay for a time, all while on the way to Jerusalem for Jesus' last stand.

Those seventy, it's remembered just prior to Jesus' telling this story, were, as Jesus told, to take no purse, no bag, no sandals, which is to say they must make it so they had nothing worth stealing but also they couldn't provide for themselves, would need whatever would be offered them. What's more, upon being received into a household, they were to remain there, not to move from one house to the next, as if in search of better and better offerings, but to eat and drink whatever was set before them. They weren't likely to keep kosher on this trip, FYI. They might even find themselves having to receive things not to their taste, be forewarned.

As I said last week when we heard this gospel text, it's not for nothing that Luke remembers Jesus' story of the so-called Good Samaritan as following on the heels of Luke's remembering Jesus sending those seventy out. But we hardly ever hear it so. We hardly ever hear

the whole gospel text, which would have us hear all these stories in their context, in reference to one another, held together by some certain logic of each of the gospel writers. No, we usually hear it chopped up into smaller parts. Pericopes, these parts are called. And so, it's easy to hear this story of the Good Samaritan as Jesus urging his hearers to be as that Samaritan, prepared to care, empowered to care. It's easy to hear Jesus saying, "Go and do likewise," as him urging the sort of doing that the Samaritan did.

And this would be a surprising enough story if Jesus meant that we should go and do as the Samaritan did. After all, the last we heard of Samaritans was when Jesus had turned his face to Jerusalem and had begun his meandering journey heading there. The first place he thought of visiting and teaching was a Samaritan village, these who were rivals of Judeans. But they wouldn't receive Jesus, these Samaritans wouldn't; and probably due to the fact that he was heading to Jerusalem, which Samaritans held in some contempt. At this rejection, the disciples, James and John, wondered whether they should command fire from heaven to come and consume the Samaritan village. Jesus rebuked them for this. "What? No." And then, a little while later, he told a story of a Good Samaritan.

So, it would be surprising enough if the one the hearers were to go and be likewise in their doings were a Samaritan.

What's more, that would be a good enough moral to this story—that hearers should be so prepared to show care, so empowered to show care. If the world were full of people who'd learned a lesson like this, or were even partially full of that, so much the better. Why not take this as a win and go home, have brunch, read the paper?

But, look, the lawyer asks Jesus who are the neighbors whom he is to love, and Jesus tells this story and then asks the lawyer who was the neighbor to the man in need, and the lawyer says it is the one who showed mercy—which means the one who showed mercy is the neighbor whom we're to love. And *this* means that, in order fully to understand whom we're to love, we must allow ourselves to be in such a position as to need mercy from someone else.

Really, this means perhaps we're to be both, to be people who are fully prepared to show such care, fully *empowered* to show such care (and won't this even be a pleasure, to be in the position to save the day, to be in so powerful a position to know and to *have* exactly what someone else needs?) but, *but* we're also to be people who set out into a world open to what mercy it might show us, open to being surprised and delighted to what mercy it might show us.

Or not.

And that, I imagine, could be difficult for the likes of us, we who have, we who *know*.

It will also be a shattering challenge to a society such ours.

Why do so many Americans seem to think they need to be armed at such places as grocery stores and public parks. Why do a critical enough number seem to think they need to so drastically arm themselves, be ready to defend themselves, in place such as churches and shops? Why is that even an idea we have to argue against? What world do such people think they're living in? It isn't the world I know. It isn't the world the gospel of Luke would have us know, or Luke's Jesus would have us know and trust, or, if not trust, at least love.

Don't forget: the Holy Spirit.

Don't forget: the Holy Spirit is alive and at work in the world.

Stepping back from the problem of a pervasive sense that we need to be armed and defended even for our everyday doings, I think of the generation of parents to which I belong, and I wonder at why I never fell in with the notion that we needed to monitor our children at all times. Helicopter parenting, it was called, this mode founded on an assumption that the world was out to get us and moreover our children, and that they didn't want to live as much as we their parents wanted them to live. That common sense wouldn't kick in. That basic social tendency and trust wouldn't kick in. Why are we so afraid?

"Most people are mostly good most of the time." This is what I told my kids when they were younger. This is what I told myself when the light rail of wild Minneapolis spirited me away from my more willful child. "Most people are mostly good most of the time. (I also held my phone tight in case he were to call—and, when he didn't, about a half hour later, I called him. He was at the hotel. He was going to text with friends.)

This is hardly comparable to the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, I know.

But this proves the point all the more. We have little to fear, and abundant reason to hope, especially if we invest in our hope. So let us serve as we can, and receive as we need, and rejoice in the times when we are in a position of need to receive—for this will reveal to us a world more full of neighbors than we might otherwise know.

We have little to fear, and abundant reason to hope. So, let's go and do likewise.

Thanks be to God.

