

A Question of Law and Gospel

Luke 10:25-37
Deuteronomy 30:9-14

5 Pentecost 2019
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By this time in St. Luke's narrative of Jesus' ministry, things are heading for a definite climax. He has sent out disciples to preach the good news of the kingdom of God. Though many came back rejoicing in the power of that message, it is clear that Jesus will not go unchallenged. Just as he is offering a prayer of thanks for the returning disciples, a lawyer shows up to, as the text says, "test" Jesus.

As tempting as it is, at this point, to whip off a few of my favorite lawyer jokes, it is important not to trivialize the man's job description. He is described as a "nomikos" in the language of the Bible – a man of the law. The law, in this encounter, is the law of God, the law handed down to Moses. It's the way of life and wholeness in the land of promise, the way to eternal life in the Kingdom of God. In other words, the lawyer knows his stuff.

As a prelude to one of the most famous parables of this gospel, the lawyer asks the all-time million-dollar question, "**What must I do to inherit eternal life?**" The surprising thing about this question is that the lawyer, of all people, should know better than to ask it. Maybe Luke is telling a lawyer joke. To "**inherit**," in the language of the bible, is a legal term, referencing one's birthright. Technically, you don't have to do anything to inherit a birthright beyond being born. If, indeed, eternal life is an inheritance, there is nothing the lawyer can "**do**" to obtain it. If it is not a birthright, that's a whole different story. We say that eternal life or membership in the Kingdom community is a divine gift, a gesture of God's grace, sealed in our birthright through Holy Baptism. We know this because we are Lutherans and have been taught about grace from the day of our baptism.

It seems that a lot of other Christians, however, are still confused about these things. A lot of other Christians, not Lutherans, of course, but other Christians, are still asking lawyer-like questions about what one must "**do**" in order to inherit eternal life. In asking the question they often think they know the answer and anyone who does not conform to their answer will likely not inherit eternal life. That's lawyer-like thinking. Though Luther's father wanted him to become a lawyer, Luther resisted and became a priest. Few Lutherans have become lawyers since.

Jesus plays along with the lawyer in today's Gospel and answers by asking a lawyerly question himself. What is written in the Law, or as they would have called it, Torah? Jesus is, of course, talking about the writings in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, which specify, in some detail, how the people of God are to relate to one another and to God. The 10 Commandments are found there. The lawyer answers with the grand synthesis of the Covenant Code, recorded in Deuteronomy 6 and recited by Jews like we recite the Lord's Prayer. It's known as the "Shema."

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." To this, the lawyer rightly adds the addendum from Leviticus 19, "**You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.**"

The lawyer's answer precludes his next question, unless, as I suggested, Luke is poking fun here. There is no need to ask, "**who is my neighbor?**" The answer is already given in the text quoted. One's neighbor is one of "**your people.**" Neighbors are kin, members of the clan and tribe. Neighbors are people who look like us, dress like us, think like us, and act like us. Neighbors are other legitimate Israelites, other inheritors of the Covenant birthright described in the very texts the lawyer quoted. In terms of gene pool, family ties, and religious ties to the God of Israel, the lawyer knew full well who his neighbors were – and they certainly were not mixed race Samaritans or light skinned Romans or pig eating Canaanites or anyone else outside the covenant community of Israel. Eternal

life, as a description of life in the Kingdom of God, was thought by many to be a matter of birthright or inheritance and was shared only with one's neighbors. The lawyer presumed the answer to the questions he was asking and only asked, as the text says, **"to test Jesus."**

In terms of the Gospel, however, it becomes clear that this lawyer is no Perry Mason. Jesus adeptly re-defines the concept of neighbor with the story of the Good Samaritan, one of the most famous parables in all the Bible. Surprisingly, a lot of modern-day Christians are just as limited in their understanding of neighbor as the lawyer – not Lutherans, of course, because we know better. We know better than to exclude from our definition of neighbor those who don't look, smell, dress, think, eat, pray, sing, believe, or act like us. We know better than to exclude from our Kingdom image people who are not Caucasian, Protestant, and Republican. We know better – don't we?

By parable's end, Jesus leads the lawyer to a new understanding of both "inheritance" and "neighbor." I suppose every preacher who has ever preached on this text has asked who are the "Samaritans" in today's world. Countless pitches for social justice and Christian activism have been linked to the parable of the "Good Samaritan." As increasing thousands flock to our southern border, numerous cries for Samaritan relief have been raised. Even though we, Lutherans, know better than to link eternal life with religious charity, I would ask us to consider what it might mean for us, Immanuel Lutheran Church, to be a "neighborly Samaritan" in our community today? After all, that is what Jesus commanded the lawyer, **"Go and do likewise."** Be a neighbor.

Frankly, I think we do a pretty good job of that. Looking back on the Comprehensive Ministry Review of a couple weeks ago, I was surprised by how many ways Immanuel reaches out to those in need through Manna Pantry, Dump and Run, Brother's Keeper, Hope House, and countless other individual efforts. Many of us are involved in all kinds of ministries in our community.

To repeat the obvious, there is nothing we can do, individually or as a church to merit or earn eternal life. That's a gift, pure and simple. Likewise, there is nothing, by virtue of birth or life circumstance that excludes others from our neighborly concern. Some of those for whom we might extend our neighbor definition may not look like us. I'm not just talking about race. I am also talking about culture. I'm talking about people who are not even sure God exists, let alone cares. I'm talking about people who don't know the difference between the 10 Commandments and the Top Ten reasons to get on the "keto" diet. I am talking about people whose spiritual and social orientation may be very different from ours. These are our neighbors. What we share is a common yearning for hope and meaning in life. What we all need is a healing word of forgiveness and an assurance from a power greater than ourselves that our lives matter. These are the things that bind us as neighbors.

Today, we are invited to remember and celebrate the life of one to whom the gospel of life gave hope in hopeless times. I didn't know Debbie Hagedorn all that well. I was privileged to meet her on a couple occasions during the last months of her life, a life marked with many struggles. Yet the person I met was not a bitter recluse, but rather a grateful soul, one who welcomed my presence and found true hope in the forgiving, saving grace of God. We talk about the Good Samaritans among us. Phyllis Lindsey is one of them – always looking for and ministering to sick, injured, and bereaved. Carol Wilson-Jungck is another. There are many others among us, whose stories I don't know.

Next Sunday, after worship, a number of us are going out into the neighborhood around Immanuel, seeking the prayer concerns of those who surround this building. It is one way of taking grace into the world, of being Samaritan-like to those in our immediate community. This is not a hard task, even for evangelically shy Lutherans. A script is prepared, materials printed. All we need are your feet to greet – knock on a few doors and let people know that Immanuel cares for their prayers. Sign-up sheets are in the narthex. Take a moment to add your name and let us let our neighbors know we are here for them.