

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 10, 2022

“Jesus said to him, ‘What is written in the law? How do you read it?’”

So says Jesus to a scholar of the law. Jesus is doing what he does so well - follows a question with a question (or two questions in this case). The scholar wants to know what he needs to do to inherit eternal life. But Jesus wants to know what the scholar thinks before giving his “answer”.

How do you read it?

Such a simple question. Yet, Jesus knows that the answer is not so simple. The scholar quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures about how we are to love God with everything we have, and love our neighbors as ourselves. That’s the “textbook” answer. The scholar has it exactly right. At least on the surface. But Jesus knows the truth of the matter - that the first part of those verses doesn’t mean much (if anything) if we fail to embrace and live out the second part - the part about loving our neighbors. You can’t really have one without the other. The **ONLY** way to truly love God is to sincerely love the people God loves - and that means everybody.

And so he tells a story – what we call the story of The Good Samaritan. And he does so to illustrate an essential point in what it means to be faithful. He makes the “hero” of the story someone the Jewish people would have disliked (and vice-versa), makes the “faithful” one the opposite of what his hearers would have expected.

And he does so for a simple reason. You see, Jesus knew that most people (Jews, Samaritans, and others) had a very narrow view of who their “neighbors” were, had a very narrow, exclusive view of who they had a responsibility to. Helping someone next door was a no-brainer. After all, they were part of your group. But helping someone from a different group, a mistrusted group, a hated group? Well, that was a different story. Jesus was saying, “No, it isn’t.”

We do this sort of thing all the time. We interpret laws in whatever way that benefits ourselves, striving to find “loopholes” so we can basically continue doing whatever it is we wanted to do all along. I’m sure you know what I’m talking about. But it isn’t just something we do regarding civil law. We do it with God’s laws all the time, so often that we maybe forget we’re even doing it.

Take the Ten Commandments for example:

Honor our fathers and mothers? Well, not if they really drive us crazy or become too burdensome.

Not steal? Well, that only applies to the big stuff.

Not commit adultery? Well, if I’m unhappy, what am I supposed to do?

Not kill? Well, what if someone does something really bad? Or what if some country is doing things that are really hurting our economy and disrupting our way of life?

Not bear false witness? Well, I need to put the blame on someone other than me.

Not covet my neighbor’s wife? Well, I would never cross the line. (At least, I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t).

Not covet my neighbor’s goods? Well, isn’t that exactly how our system works? We’re all competing to get as much as we can.

I hope you get the picture. So often we take the commands of God and try to limit them to the point that they almost become meaningless, limit them to the point that we are able to rationalize just about anything and everything we want to do. And when we do that, well, they’ve simply become words, things we say but never really attempt to live out.

God wants from us something much different. He wants us to understand his laws (that is, his commands that we be loving, merciful, kind, generous, and forgiving) in the broadest sense possible - recognize that truly being faithful is so much more than just doing a few good things or avoiding a few bad things.

It's really about seeing every other person as our neighbor - deserving of our care, our concern, our love - regardless of who they are or what difficulties we might have with them. Even our enemies are our neighbors. Imagine that.

And so, let's do what we can to resist interpreting God's commands in a narrow sense. Rather, let's try to see them as doorways to a more meaningful life, a more beautiful life, a more faithful life. But that can only happen if we are willing to step through into the all-encompassing kingdom - recognizing just how boundless God's love is for us.

How do you read it?

My dear friends in Christ, may our love be as boundless as God's is. And may we be willing to share that love - not with a few, but with the whole world.

Short Story

Once a man had gone for his weekly market fair and was returning home happy with the purchases. It was pretty dark and the path was very narrow. By mistake he slipped and fell in the pond filled with muck and it was extremely cold. However much he tried to come out he could not and worse still he went on sinking in the muck. He kept on shouting for help.

To his good fortune, a man was passing that way in a horse cart and when he heard the cries he stopped. He threw a rope to the man and tied it to his horse and with difficulty he pulled him out. Then he took the nearly

unconscious man to his home, washed him clean, and wrapped him in the blanket.

The man recovered in a couple of days and wanted to return to his village. He thanked his benefactor for the favor done and asked what his name was. The benefactor refused. When the person still insisted the good man asked him a question, asking if he knew the story of the Good Samaritan. The man responded positively. Then he said if he could tell him the name of the Good Samaritan and he would reveal his name. The man thought a while and said it is not recorded in the Bible. Nor will I tell you mine. Kindly go and be a Good Samaritan.