

Please! I need a neighbor right now.

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.

7th Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 10, Year C. July 11, 2010. (Text: Luke 10:27-35)

I want to ask a question: How many of you here would like to have eternal life, if you could? —May we have a show of hands? Thanks.

Few people ever give a “No” answer to that question. If eternal life is a possibility, 100% of us would like to have it. It’s normal for people in our culture to *want* to have eternal life. —So the question with which today’s gospel reading began is still important, two thousand years later. And it’s even more relevant when we realize that in the context of Jesus’ teaching, eternal life isn’t something that has to wait until we die and go to heaven. It can be had right now, today.

The opening line says, *“A lawyer stood up to test Jesus.”* I’m going to resist the temptation to tell a lawyer joke here. Anyway, the “lawyer” that questioned Jesus wasn’t the kind we make jokes about today. He was a “scribe,” an expert in the Law of Moses. And the favorite pastime of such people was to debate each other about how to interpret the Law. So when the lawyer asked Jesus, *“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life,”* he was doing what his kind always did. But the question he asked was totally new. Nothing in the writings of the ancient rabbis shows that this particular question had ever been asked. They displayed no interest in “eternal life.” So, then, the scribe’s question, by itself, should get our attention. He was asking a question that could only have been asked by someone who had already spent some time thinking about the teachings of Jesus. Jesus turned the question back on the questioner, and asked him, *“What do you find written in the Law? How do you understand it?”*

Then the lawyer who had asked a unique question gave an equally unique answer: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and strength, and mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”* Jesus agreed that he was right. *“Do this,”* Jesus said, *“and you will live.”* But then the lawyer, *“desiring to justify himself,”* asked, *“But who is my neighbor?”* Notice that the issue here shifts from love of God and love of neighbor exclusively to love of neighbor. —Could it be that Luke is inviting us to see an essential connection between the two loves? What do you think? I have no doubt about that at all.

The lawyer’s “desire to justify himself” could mean that he wanted Jesus to propose a definition of the limits of love. *“Where do I draw the line? Who belongs to my personal community of care? Who must I love because they’re my neighbors? And can I still inherit eternal life if I ignore people who are not legally my neighbors?”* —He was a lawyer, and the Law was unambiguous. The Lord was the God of Israel, and neighbors were *Jewish* neighbors, plus such gentile sojourners as were living among them.

To answer the lawyer’s question, Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the best-known of all his stories. “Good Samaritan” has now become the popular name, even among non-Christians, for someone who goes out of his way to render aid to a stranger. We can grasp the essence of the parable pretty quickly: my neighbor isn’t necessarily just someone who lives on my block, or belongs to my church, or to my ethnic group (as in the Law of Moses). My *neighbor* is anybody – from anywhere – who needs the help I can offer.

Jesus put a twist in his story by making its hero the representative of a category of people that Jews despised. That must have shocked his audience. It would have been like a preacher in the deep South in 1859 choosing to use a black man’s behavior as an illustration of virtue in a sermon —and then, to make

things even worse, comparing the black man's compassion with the heartlessness of a couple of white clergymen. Folks in the pews would have been outraged. That preacher would have been gone before the next Sunday.

But Jesus' point was clear: If you want to inherit eternal life, you must behave like a "neighbor" to whatever sorts of needy people you encounter in your path through life —even if they're definitely not "your kind of people." Even if they are your enemies.

We usually hear this parable as a nice little story with a nice little moral. We identify ourselves with the Samaritan. We believe that we'd do exactly what he did if we were confronted on a lonely and dangerous stretch of road with a poor victim of highway robbery. Thinking that way keeps us comfortable. —But there's plenty of evidence that we might be deluding ourselves. Our society is full of people who do *not* imitate the Good Samaritan, even when they have an obvious opportunity.

We learn from Jesus a lot better if, instead of identifying with the Good Samaritan, we identify ourselves with the victim. Jesus is telling a story about *us* lying there by the highway, stripped, robbed, nearly dead, and desperately needing somebody — anybody, friend or foe! — to have compassion on us before we die.

Listen to these quotes from an ABC-TV special last April:

In Seattle in January of this year, a 15-year-old girl was brutally beaten, knocked unconscious and robbed by a group of teenagers while three security guards stood by and watched. (Do you reckon none of those guards had ever been to church?)

In Hartford, Conn., a 78-year-old man was hit by a car as he crossed a street... The driver never stopped. A total of 10 vehicles drove by as he lay in the middle of the road, bleeding from the head. (I guess none of those ten drivers who went by the man lying in the street had ever heard of the Good Samaritan.)

And in Washington, D.C.... a man was shot at a gas station. Instead of calling for help, the only witness finished pumping kerosene into a can, paid and drove off.

That girl in the story could have been your daughter. That 78 year old man could have been your father. The man shot at the gas station could have been you.

Here's a story from the newspapers a couple of decades back:

An older couple was traveling on a lonely stretch of the thruway in rural New York State when they had a flat tire. The man tried but could not change it himself. So they hung a white handkerchief on the antenna of their car and waited. It was a summer night about 11:30 p.m. Lots of cars whizzed by at high speed. After a long time, a truck pulled over.

The white motorists were a little apprehensive when a black man got out of the truck. The truck driver asked what the problem was. The stranded man asked if he could use his CB radio to call Triple-A or the police. (*The CB radio part tells you how long ago this was! Maybe 1981?*) The truck driver asked again what was wrong. The man told him that he had a flat tire and could not change it.

The truck driver said he could do it, and so he changed the tire for them.

When he was done, the stranded motorist offered to pay something, as a thank you. The man said no, he wouldn't accept money. He told the man that he was a member of the Islamic faith, and his religion taught him to help strangers in need. Then he reached into his own pocket and handed the motorist a twenty dollar bill. He told him to take his wife to get something to eat, on him! The driver of the car said no, but the trucker stuck the bill in the man's shirt pocket. The motorist took it out and gave it back to him, but the truck driver just threw the bill into the open door of the man's car, told him to take care, climbed into the cab of his truck and drove off!

Loving other people the way we love ourselves demands that we *identify with them*...whoever they are, and that we perceive that *we* and *they* are alike, members of the same "community" —all of us children of God to whom life can deal out unexpected wounds and bruises.

To love my neighbor as myself means to so *identify with* the need or hurt of another person that the care I give that person is precisely the same as I'd want to receive if I were in a similar state of need.

Are we able to love and care for needy strangers when there's nobody watching? Or does it take the social pressure of a community to shame us into putting our faith into practice?

The central figure of our faith is the Son of God, who came to give us eternal life. Jesus identified with *our human need*... our loneliness, our desire to be loved just as we are, our fear of death, our need for forgiveness, our hunger for a shepherd to lead us. If we're serious about inheriting that "eternal life" that Jesus talked about right now – not just in the sweet by-and-by – we have to get serious about imitating Him, opening our hearts to share the pain or grief or hunger or fear of everyone we meet, and reaching out in mercy to do whatever we can to show them love.

Barbara Brown Taylor says: *"To hear Jesus talk about it, eternal life also means hitting the jackpot now. Eternal life means enjoying a depth and breadth and sweetness of life that is available right this minute, not only after we have breathed our last... Let the summer showers of God's love soak the seeds of your right answers so that they blossom into right actions and watch the landscape begin to change. Just do it, and find out that when you do, you LIVE, and live abundantly, just like The Man said."*