

5 Pentecost Luke 10:25-37
Christ and Grace July 14, 2019
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Some years ago in seminary, my Hebrew professor was an amazing man of God and teacher named Carson Brisson. I could not begin to tell you all the things he taught us in addition to Hebrew, all the ways he cracked open our hearts, souls, and minds so that God's love could seep in. He did this, not by quoting scripture or even by teaching us to read Hebrew. He did this by telling us stories about God's people, and about how much God loves God's people. Do I remember all the details of the Hebrew language? Regretfully, no, but I have never forgotten the things I learned about God from Carson's stories. I love Hebrew because every word reveals something of God's nature and God's love. Learning to overcome my fear of Hebrew taught me the greater lesson that God's love overcomes fear.

Whenever Carson sensed we were drowning in the difficulties of Hebrew grammar, he would stop teaching and tell us a story. The stories always had a way of helping us see the bigger picture, the more important theological point that the Hebrew writers were expressing. The stories helped us let go of our fear about learning all those verb tenses, and vocabulary lists, because summer Hebrew class is intense, it's a fearful thing! But Carson could calm our fear and refocus us with a story.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells the lawyer a story - because the lawyer is fearful. In his fear he is testing the limits, is worried he will not get what he needs, is worried that all the requirements for his eternal life might not be filled. So he asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life.

But Jesus wants to help the lawyer see the bigger picture and the power of God's love. He wants the lawyer to think outside the jury box. He wants the lawyer to know that eternal life begins now, and that the lawyer's fear is preventing him from truly living. And so Jesus questions the lawyer. "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" Now the lawyer did not pay all that tuition and spend all that time in law school for nothing. He easily quotes portions of Leviticus and Deuteronomy to Jesus. "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." "Good answer!" says Jesus, "Do this, and you will live. You have gotten the right answer, you understand, and you know what to do. Now do it."

But the lawyer becomes fearful again because suddenly this is sounding complicated. "Do this? Wait a minute, Jesus... what I really need to know is who is *not* my neighbor. How much love are we talking about here, Jesus? Can you be more specific? Where should I draw the line? Outside my front door? At the edges of my neighborhood? Along the religious and cultural boundaries I was raised with to keep me pure and holy? I mean, there are lines, aren't there? There must be lines. We can't be neighbors with everyone, can we? The lawyer knows there is no way he can do this on his own and he's not at all sure that he even wants to. There's a lot of risk involved in loving people who are not like us, who might harm us, and risk brings fear. The lawyer hopes to make this complicated enough so that his fear and his inaction won't be noticed. Because suddenly loving his neighbor is sounding scary.

But Jesus knows that all the lawyer's arguing and his questions about the definition of a neighbor are really a cover for the fear that is deep down inside him. And that is when Jesus tells the story of the Samaritan to help the lawyer take a break from his fear, to help him see the bigger picture, the more important theological point. Jesus tells him the story about how it does not matter what we think, understand, know, feel, or say about love, but what we *do* about love that brings us life. He tells a story of love that overcomes fear.

A man is attacked by robbers, and those who *should* help him pass by on the other side. They are afraid to help because it might be dangerous, it might cost them something. The most unlikely traveler stops to help the man. A Samaritan, who had every reason to fear, but chose to show love.

To say that Jews and Samaritans were not on the best of terms would be an understatement. As far as the Jews were concerned, there was no such thing as a *good* Samaritan! And I am not so sure the Samaritans felt any differently about the Jews. After telling the story, Jesus asks the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The lawyer replied, "The one who showed him mercy."

Do you notice that the lawyer cannot even bring himself to say 'Samaritan' because he is so disconnected from and fearful of him? But Jesus does not call him to task about that, he just says, "Go and do likewise; *do* this and you will live." And do you notice that when the lawyer asks Jesus, "who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered by telling a story that was really a question, "whose neighbor are you? How are you being a neighbor?" Because the answer to the question is that we are the neighbors, everyone's neighbors.

So how are we being neighbors to the people who live near our homes? How are we being neighbors to the community around Christ and Grace? How are we being neighbors to the Samaritans in our lives? Those we judge unworthy, those who vote differently, worship differently, or live differently?

This story that Jesus tells can give us a larger perspective, can reveal to us the inclusive love of God, can teach us that it is our fear that makes us judge and exclude and hate those who are different. In our fear we assume there are no good Samaritans and that people in ditches are not to be trusted. In our fear we assume there are no good homeless people, when intellectually we know that we are only a few lost paychecks away from being homeless ourselves. In our fear we assume that every immigrant is coming to harm us, when we intellectually know that our great nation was founded and built by immigrants.

What can we take away from this gospel? Love God. Love your neighbor. Be a neighbor. And let us not complicate things by arguing about the specifics or stereotyping the whole based on the actions of a few. Like the lawyer we can quote scripture and know all the right answers, but that does not change a thing. If you want the world to look different the next time you go outside, do some love. And if you find that fear is guiding your thoughts or your actions, take a break and

let Jesus tell *you* a story. A story about how much God loves you, loves all of us. A story about what it looks like to do love.¹

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. Which of these three, do *you* think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

We say, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus says to us, “Go and do likewise.”

¹ I am indebted to Barbara Brown Taylor for much inspiration, from her sermon, “Do Love”, *The Preaching Life*, (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1993), 114-20.