

February 14, 2016

“Choices” Pt. 3

Luke 10:25-37

I don't find it hard to understand the popularity of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. In fact here is one of the teaching stories of Jesus that has so influenced our culture and culture in general in the western world, that we all think we know what is meant by the phrase Good Samaritan. Even people who have no relationship with the church or interest in the Bible think they know what is being talked about when the phrase good Samaritan pops up in language. If you look up Samaritan in the Oxford Dictionary here is what you find. Samaritan...good...a genuinely charitable person, ref. Luke 10:33. A genuinely charitable person. Some one who knows what it is to love your neighbour.

Here is the part that everyone tends to overlook. If you ask the question how did Jesus come to tell that story, to teach that lesson about helping the wounded and the helpless. Remember? It began with a choice made by this Teacher of the Law. This Jewish Old Testament scholar. He stood up at one of Jesus open air teaching sessions and he said, I have a question Teacher. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” But, he was not really looking for the answer to that question was he? No he had stood up to test Jesus, in fact to tempt Jesus, to tempt Jesus into saying something that could be used against Him, in the Jewish Sanhedrin. Even better, something that could get Jesus in trouble with the Romans who controlled Judea at the time.

But the question he chose to ask was, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” In fact that is precisely where he gets our attention. As a bunch of Protestants, as a group of Presbyterians, this is a question to which we not only want to hear the answer, we tend to feel the Teacher of the Law is asking something we might have

wanted to ask...not to tempt Jesus or test Him, but to have the answer from the One we regard as the Lord of Life. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

You will remember Jesus turned the question around. It became a boomerang. The one thing the Teacher of the Law had not considered was that Jesus might indeed recognize his expertise and do what he did. “How do you read the Scriptures,” Jesus asked in return. And here we are studying not the Teacher of the Law's answer, or even Jesus answer, but the answer of the Scriptures. On the basis of Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19 the Teacher of the Law isolates the issues for us, the very issues raised by his own question. “Loves God.” Really love God. And that as a son of Abraham, the Teacher of the Law knew meant...faith. Believe.

And of course the second part of the answer was “Love your neighbour.” Living carefully. Living your life full of care for others. Not just caring what happens to those you like, or those who belong to your own family or your own ethnic group. Not just caring about those who it is convenient to care about. Because it fits into your time table, or with your own understanding of who is important. No! Loving your neighbour involves risk. Going the extra mile. Touching those you would rather not touch, helping and being with those you might rather avoid.

Interested in eternal life? There are the issues. Love God...faith that shapes the rest of your life. And caring about others even when it hurts. Even when it could cost your own life. The preacher and pastor Andy Stanley says, “If you want to understand what Jesus means in what Jesus says you have to take a look at what Jesus did.” The issues raised in answering the question “what must I

do to receive eternal life?" lead us directly to Calvary. To the cross. To all of the pain that Jesus suffered leading up to his death. He was there for us. He was there because He was truly about His Father's business. And He cared about what happens to us when our bodies give out, when we die.

The parable of the good Samaritan. Notice this. Jesus did not give the parable its title. Generations of Clergy, Bible Teachers, Bible translators, Pastors and Preachers came up with the name. That title is not part of the Biblical Text, it is something added to aid the reader, to tell us where we are as we read the Gospel of Luke. I have said and I mean, I think it would be better titled the parable of the merciful Samaritan. I take that from the text itself, from the words of Jesus. Because at the end of the story Jesus asked the Teacher of the Law the final question. The final question leads to the answer of the second question posed by the Teacher of the Law. He wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, who is my neighbour? Jesus tells the story.

And it is a story that has barbs. It is a story that needles. Jesus knew exactly what He was doing when he told the part about the priest who came on the body lying in the road, and the priest considers what to do, and who might be hiding in the rocks, and the duties that call him to be making his journey, and he crosses the road to the far side...maintains distance and hastens on his way. Jesus knew what he was saying when he said a Levite...possibly a Teacher of the Law like yourself, did the same thing. There is a one-two punch there. And if you don't think the Teacher of the Law who had asked the question did not bristle at those remarks you are wrong. These portraits are not flattering to the one who asked the questions "What must I do to inherit eternal life" and "Who is my neighbour."

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And it gets worse. When the Samaritan is the one who shows mercy to the wounded victim of a violent crime, it is an insult to the Teacher of the Law, who would have nothing good to say about those people from Samaria. Jesus is saying to the Teacher of the Law, that Samaritan has more of a chance at eternal life than you do. And if that is not bad enough, Jesus makes the Teacher of the Law say it with his own tongue. “Which of these 3 do you think was neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers on the Jericho Road?”

This encounter has become a disaster. There is bitterness in the voice of the Teacher of the Law as he gives the only answer he can give in public, and with a certain amount of humiliation. “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus asked him to name the neighbourly character. The Teacher of the Law could not bring himself to say the word Samaritan.

The parable is still about that initial question. What must I do to inherit eternal life? According to Jesus, using the powerful words of the Scriptures, in the mouth of the Teacher of the Law who is an expert in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, you have to have faith so strong that onlookers could only conclude you love God with all your heart and all your mind and all your strength and all your soul. And you have to love other people the way this Samaritan loved the Jew who was victimized on the Jericho Road. When you know...when you know...if the victim had been a Samaritan...a Jewish priest or a Jewish Teacher of the Law would have left him to die of his wounds.

This first Sunday of Lent, is a day on which we really turn out attention from everything else. Christmas is over and done. The

other things that we have paid attention to following the celebration of Jesus being born are set to one side. We begin the work of focusing our attention on the cross. On Jesus death, and resurrection. On the things Jesus did and the things Jesus said even as that agony was unfolding. We endeavour once again in the words of the old hymn...to come to the cross. Where Jesus cares so much about sinners like you and me, that he offers himself in our place, to extend us mercy before God who is our Father.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is an appropriate Bridge to the Lenten season's purpose of riveting our attention on Calvary. Why? Because the parable is still about the question, what must I do to receive eternal life. And the answer is that eternal life is given to those who believe and do good works, works that show forth the truth that our faith is genuine, not only to God but to the world where we are living. The works of a vibrant faith in Jesus can be risky. They can lead us into experiences that are painful. I want to leave you with two other verses from the Bible. They remind us that we have not been promised a rose garden. These two verses also remind us that the issue is eternal life.

First: Matthew 5:11 and 12. Jesus says to us, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Second: James 2:17 “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

Let us pray;

Lord, we have all smiled over the poster which reads, “If you were arrested for being a follower of Jesus, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” Lord grant that there might be loads of evidence. Grant that the jury would be out for a matter of a few minutes. And grant that we might be found guilty of following you...wherever you lead us. Amen