

Luke 10:25-37

²⁵ Just then a religion scholar stood up with a question to test Jesus. “Teacher, what do I need to do to get eternal life?”

²⁶ He answered, “What’s written in God’s Law? How do you interpret it?”

²⁷ He said, “That you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence—and that you love your neighbor as well as you do yourself.”

²⁸ “Good answer!” said Jesus. “Do it and you’ll live.”

²⁹ Looking for a loophole, he asked, “And just how would you define ‘neighbor’?”

³⁰⁻³² Jesus answered by telling a story. “There was once a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. On the way he was attacked by robbers. They took his clothes, beat him up, and went off leaving him half-dead. Luckily, a priest was on his way down the same road, but when he saw him he angled across to the other side. Then a Levite religious man showed up; he also avoided the injured man.

³³⁻³⁵ “A Samaritan traveling the road came on him. When he saw the man’s condition, his heart went out to him. He gave him first aid, disinfecting and bandaging his wounds. Then he lifted him onto his donkey, led him to an inn, and made him comfortable. In the morning he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take good care of him. If it costs any more, put it on my bill—I’ll pay you on my way back.’

³⁶ “What do you think? Which of the three became a neighbor to the man attacked by robbers?”

³⁷ “The one who treated him kindly,” the religion scholar responded.

Jesus said, “Go and do the same.”

How Should We Live? The Ethics of Jesus

Today, this third Sunday of our worship series about *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White* we explore the ethics of Jesus. Ethics are the principles that govern our behavior, and we often summarize Jesus ethics with the words he speaks in Matthew’s gospel:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

Matthew 22:37

And two verses later...

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Matthew
22:39

Of course we immediately run into a problem with this ethic. Part of the problem involves the definition of ‘love.’ The English language is a bit limited this way in that we

have that single word ‘love’ to describe a rather complex thing. There are four words in the original New Testament Greek language that are translated as *love agápe*, *éros*, *phília*, and *storgē*. When we hear pop singers crooning about love it’s usually *eros* that they’re referring to – physical attraction. *Storge* is parent-child love, *philia* is like camaraderie – love between equals, and then there is *agape* which is often translated *charity*, or what Thomas Aquinas described as “to will the good of another.” And it is *agape* that we understand to be the love of God and the kind of love that we are to nurture within us.

But if we quibble about the definition of love, we’re doing nothing different than the scholar who quibbles about the word ‘neighbor.’ We are looking for loopholes. Tell me who I have to love, and I can hate the rest. Tell me exactly what you mean by love so I know what I *don’t* have to do. This is what is commonly known as a **rules based ethic**, the kind of ethic that parents teach their children and hope that they follow. “Why do I have to go to bed at 9 o’clock?” “Because I said so.” That’s the rule! We teach our children this ethic because they don’t have the wherewithal to understand the deeper purpose of the rule. **But a rule-based ethic is limited.** We know this from our experience. When we go into a child’s bedroom at one o’clock in the morning and find that child *in bed* playing a game on some electronic device. “I thought I told you to go to bed?” And what does the child answer? “I AM in bed. You didn’t say I had to go to sleep.” Rule-based ethics spawn great lawyers, and children are the best lawyers. “Objection, Your Honor. The rule clearly states that I am to *go to bed* at 9 p.m. but it does not specify that I must turn off the light and close my eyes and fall asleep.” Children are quite capable of fining limits in our rules-based ethics.

A rule-based ethic is the foundation of many religions; Orthodox Jews strictly follow Old Testament laws, and their scholars work to interpret those laws for each new generation and all new circumstances. The Law is constant, but the interpretation may change. America lives partly on a rules-based ethic called the Constitution. We live by and defend the laws that are contained therein. And Christianity too is in part rules-based; Jesus says, “If you love me you will keep my commandments,” and so we look at what Jesus says and we try to obey him. The Bible is our foundation, and every Christian follows its teachings though they don’t always agree on what it means and when it applies. And unfortunately, Christians too spend a lot of time looking for loopholes to justify the limits that we put on our love. And so Christians disagree on a number of important issues based on their interpretation of the Bible.

But defining love does not empower us to love. And just as the scholar is searching for loopholes around the word ‘neighbor’ we so often search for loopholes around the word ‘love.’ For example, if we define God’s love as *willing the good of another*, we may restrict our actions to simply praying for someone else when we have the means to really help them in more concrete way. To the homeless person we may say, “I really pray that you find a home.” To someone suffering injustice we may pray that injustice will end.

But what are you actually *doing* besides praying, to bring about that change that needs to occur?

Another way we skirt around loving others is by making assumptions that allow us to decide what is “good” for that person. There are some people who believe that the majority of money spent on social welfare goes to people who “don’t deserve it,” even though they have no concrete facts to back up their claim, but because they have chosen to believe that the people who receive assistance are undeserving, they can claim that it is good to withhold the money in order to prompt them to find a job. They make all sorts of assumptions to justify their lack of charity and make them believe that they are indeed *loving* those people. It’s a psychological game that rationalizes greed and indifference. The truth of the matter is that none of us *love* the way God calls us to love. We all come up short. But it’s better to acknowledge our shortcomings than it is to deceive ourselves into believing that we are righteous.

Which brings me to the beauty of Jesus. Jesus is not about law and doing what is on paper; he’s not about *following* an ethic; he’s about *living* an ethic. Jesus didn’t teach by telling us to do this and to do that; he taught us by setting the example by the way he lived his life, and by telling us stories real people in real situations, and showing us the right way to act, a way that is grounded in love.

And the way Jesus lived brought him into conflict with those who had a rule-based ethic, in particular the scribes and the Pharisees, the ones who studied and interpreted the written law. What got Jesus into trouble? Healing people on the Sabbath, because the legal scholars said that healing is work, and the Law says you’re not supposed to work on the Sabbath. But Jesus explains to his critics so concisely, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

You see, Jesus’ ethic was not rules-based; it was people-based. Rather than offering clear rules on what to do in every situation, Jesus tells us to gauge our behavior based upon the need of the other. And in the seventh chapter of Matthew he gives us a commandment that goes farther than “love your neighbor” because it speaks more specifically about our *actions* toward others than about our *feelings*. “**In everything, do unto others as you would have them do unto you.**” (Matthew 7:12). This is a great rule to live by, because it doesn’t require us to come up with some comprehensive understanding of love. We don’t have to quibble over the definition of neighbor because ‘other’ means everyone. And defining ‘other’ as ‘everyone’ forces us to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes if we are determined to follow Jesus’ commandment. It forces us to at least attempt to empathize with others. So someone’s car is broken down on the highway and they are standing outside the vehicle looking upset. Do I stop, or do I drive by and hope someone else will deal with their problem? If I were the one broken down on the side of the road, would I want someone to stop and see if they could assist me?

Jesus drives in this point in today's story precisely by making the other person someone we are prone to despise, and he gives us a further lesson by making the story not about us helping the one we despise, but by making the one we despise the person who is helping us. It's the Samaritan who has compassion for the suffering Jew, who saves his life and doesn't worry about the cost.

But that's not all Jesus does. Remember it's a scholar who is asking him the question, and scholars would be experts in the Law of Moses. And so this story challenges this scholar by presenting a scenario that would be particularly difficult for a Jew who had reverence for the Law. The two men in this story who fail to attend to the needs of this dying man are a priest and a Levite, and both men would be strictly bound to obeying the Law of Moses. So both would know that coming in contact with a dead man would make them ritually unclean for a week. That meant that they could have no contact with anyone for seven days. They'd have to cancel all meetings and be unable to fulfill their responsibilities in the Temple. They're not just being callous or indifferent toward the injured man; they are weighing the cost of their actions, much as I would if I had a meeting with our Bishop and saw a stranger in need of emergency care. Imagine being not only late to a meeting but being forced to cancel all your meetings for a week and not being able to lead worship on Sunday after planning everything and knowing that it's my responsibility to lead worship. Jesus is challenging this scholar as he challenges us today to examine our priorities. Do we stop to assist the one at need, whatever the cost, or do we walk by or drive by and assume that someone else will take care of it?

That's why it's so important for us to take to heart Jesus' commandment to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. When you place yourself in the victim's shoes you understand what is a priority and what isn't. You realize just how silly your prejudices and biases are because a human life is a human life, whether black or white, Muslim or Christian, male or female, gay or straight.

And seeing gray means humbly recognizing our habit of placing ourselves first and of not doing unto others as we would have them do unto us, and of not appreciating their struggles and their suffering. Lord, help us to overcome the sin of self-aggrandizement. Help us more and more walk in the shoes of the suffering and downtrodden, as you son Jesus did. Amen.

Pastor: It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. It is your will that we live an abundant life of love for you and for one another. You sent your own Son Jesus to demonstrate such life and love to us and for us.