

“The Sign of the Samaritan”

Introduction: I don’t have to tell you that there is a huge refugee crisis that has erupted in Europe as a result of Russia’s attack on Ukraine. At last count, over 3 million Ukrainians have fled their homes and crossed the border into Poland, seeking refuge. Wonderfully, Poland has received them with open arms, providing even the same medical care that locals receive, with expenses borne by the Polish state. But just a year ago, Poland did not have the same open arms for refugees from Iraq, Syria, or Afghanistan. And, beginning earlier this year, Poland began building a fence on its border with Belarus to keep unwanted migrants out.

In a recent study undertaken at the University of Warsaw, by an organization called the Center for Prejudice Research, 90% of respondents in Poland said they accept people from Ukraine as colleagues and neighbors. But, it seems, the same acceptance is not offered to those from anywhere else.

I wonder, what explains the difference? And I ask, not to pick on Poland, but to prick my own heart, for I, too, have found myself much more sympathetic and concerned and wanting to keep myself informed about those refugees from Ukraine that I ever recall feeling for those from Iraq, Syria, or Afghanistan. Could the difference be that it’s much harder for us to accept and reach out to and care for those who are different from us in culture and color? I’m not sure I like the answer that I find lurking in my heart.

We’ve been looking at various signs that lead us to the treasure that is Jesus. What we find this morning is that sometimes these signs take us to where we’d prefer not to go, but to where Jesus knows we need to go. The “sign” we’ll see in our text is that of the Good Samaritan. The parable Jesus tells about him is not meant simply to say that if you find someone in a ditch go and help them. Its telling is prompted, and moved forward, by four questions that surface in Jesus’ interaction with one called an “expert in the law.” – What must I do to inherit eternal life? – What is written in the law? – And who is my neighbor? – Which one of these do you think was a neighbor? Let’s begin by letting our children share the story with us, and then we’ll see where these questions lead us.

I. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

A. The first question is asked by the expert: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” It’s a good question, a great question, really! It’s asked by a man whose job was to understand and apply the law of God, as handed down by Moses, for God’s people. It was an honored role, one which was intended to keep God’s word from being misunderstood or misused. Jesus certainly had begun to draw a crowd. It was enough to make the lawyer (better, the scholar) wonder: Who is this guy? Is he for real, or is he some kind of false prophet?

B. So the question he asked was really meant to test Jesus, to see if he knew his stuff. In part, he asked it, as the religious leaders liked to do with Jesus from time to time, to see if he could trip Jesus up, or get him to say something that would turn the crowds against him. But lurking in the background could also have been real curiosity on his part. The topic of eternal life was deadly serious. Jewish belief was of a resurrection of the righteous at the end of time. This fellow wanted to make sure he would be a part of that. We might ask it in this way: What do I need to do to get in touch with what God is up to in the world, and to experience the life that is truly life, the kind of life with God that begins now and continues into eternity?

## II. “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?”

A. In response, Jesus did what he often did – he answered a question with a question. This one let the expert know that Jesus valued his opinion and was interested in a dialogue. The answer the scholar gave came right out of the scriptures: “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, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Dt. 6:5; Lev. 19:18). The first is what a devout Jew would recite every morning, and the second how a devout Jew sought to live. Together, they became known as the Great Commandment, like two sides of a coin. Vertical love for God was to be manifested through horizontal love for one’s neighbor. It’s also an answer Jesus himself had given when asked about what he considered the most important commandment in the law (Mk. 12:28-31).

B. Jesus responds by affirming the scholar: “You have answered correctly.” But then he adds, “Do this and you will live.”

Illustration: Early on in his classic, *The Imitation of Christ*, author Thomas a Kempis warns against what he calls “intellectual acrobatics.” That is, the acquisition of knowledge simply for the sake of acquiring it and being therefore able to think highly of oneself. Of these individuals, a Kempis writes, “Would that their living had been equal to their learning; then they would have studied and lectured to good purpose. How many perish in the world because of useless learning and for caring little about the service of God!” [p. 7]

Our learning must turn into living, our knowing into doing. Blessed are those, Jesus says, who hear the word of God and put it into practice. The scholar tells Jesus what he knows; Jesus replies, go and do it.

## III. “And who is my neighbor?”

A. But the scholar is not ready for that yet. He first wants to know about the scope of this doing. The question he asks, Luke tells us, was because the scholar wanted to “justify himself.” It’s what we tend to do when we feel uncomfortable, when we know we might not quite be in the right, when we sense more is being asked of us than we really want to give. The scholar was thinking that there were some out there who did not come under the heading of “neighbor,” some he didn’t need to care about. He wanted permission to draw a line beyond which God’s grace, and his love, didn’t have to reach.

What comes to mind when you hear the word “neighbor?” Where would you like to draw the line? At those of a different political persuasion? At those of a different color? At those whose belief system is different than yours? At someone who bullied you in middle school? The temptation is to draw it at people just like us, to put up a fence to keep out people who are not like us. The scholar wanted to build a fence. Jesus told a parable.

B. It’s familiar enough. It features a lot of people walking. A traveler walks into a mugging, loses everything, and is left for dead. Two religious professionals walk on by, crossing the road without lifting a finger to help. A third fellow appears. This one walks the extra mile of love as he disinfects the mugged man, bandages him, takes him to an inn, and provides for his continued care. The shock, however, was that this man, the one who loved the mugged man, was a hated Samaritan. He was from a people group that were a mixed race, and who had been at political and theological odds with the Jews for centuries. It must’ve been almost too hard to hear Jesus tell it. Jesus made the Samaritan the hero!

#### IV. “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor...?”

A. And in so doing, he launched the last question of the four. The scholar couldn't bear even to bring himself to say the word “Samaritan,” but he did answer, “The one who had mercy on him.” And then the last word from Jesus, “Go and do likewise.”

Do you see what Jesus has done? He's refused to catalogue who a neighbor is, Instead, he's turned the question around from Who is my neighbor? to Are you willing to be a neighbor? and, What kind of neighbor will you be? In the process, Jesus refused to set a boundary, build a fence, or draw a line because true love knows none of those artificial limits. To participate in what God is doing, to enter into the life that is truly life, the life that begins now and extends on into eternity, comes by turning love from a noun into a verb in order to bring life to others, no matter who they may be.

B. One helpful way of praying through this text might be to put yourself in the place of the mugged man, the one who lay half-dead in the ditch. In that position, we have no hope until Jesus comes along and spends his life to bind up our wounds and rescue us. That is real love. We did nothing to deserve it. It is the way of the cross. It reaches out to others in the way Jesus reached out to us.

We might not live on the border of Ukraine, but we live somewhere, and we can therefore be a neighbor to someone. What might love be asking of us? Will we go and do it?