

November 25, 2007
Jeanine Noyes in Concert
Guest Speaker: John Deacon

One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: 'Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus replied, 'What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?'

The man answered, "'You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.' And, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "Right!" Jesus told him. "Do this and you will live!" The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus replied with a story: "A Jewish man was traveling on a trip from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road.

"By chance a priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. A Temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side.

"Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, 'Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I'll pay you the next time I'm here.' "Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?" Jesus asked. The man replied, "The one who showed him mercy."

**Then Jesus said, "Yes, now go and do the same."
(Luke 10:25-37)**

I think of the 3 - the priest, the Levite and the Good Samaritan - as the 3 forms that church can take.

The first, a priest/minister, we can imagine to be someone who preaches a good sermon but is so heaven focused that he can't connect with the hard issues of the street.

The second, a church administrator or consultant, knows what it takes to keep people in the pews, how to get them to contribute money and volunteer their time to keep the church running...

The third, the Samaritan is someone who wouldn't be welcome in church, whose theology is suspect, perhaps a Jehovah's Witness or a Muslim fundamentalist. But he is also a man of means and there is in his caring response to the man beaten, the sense that he has

done this kind of thing before. It's as though in packing for the trip from Jerusalem to Jericho - he knows the road well enough to expect that he'll encounter in someone who has been victimized by either violence or theft.

Remembering what prompted Jesus to tell this story – the religious expert's question- 'what must I do to inherit eternal (real) life?' - Jesus in telling this parable is pointing to the exact spot on the road of life where eternal (real) life is found. It is found in our connecting with the man beaten, the woman ostracized, the child forsaken.

Some of us are like the priest. We have been going to church for years - we can quote 'chapter and verse' on theological issues ranging from the Incarnation to the Final Judgment - but see a man beaten on the side of the road and all our biblical knowledge goes right out the window. For all that we've learned about the Christian faith, we are paralyzed when we see poverty or sectarian violence...

And we struggle with an emptiness which is hard to put into words. It's a hunger for justice which can't be satisfied with anything less than our seeking justice for those left for dead on the side of the road. Otherwise we retreat into a private spirituality that has us pining for heaven and wishing the world would go away. And that might be ok except the eternal life Jesus is talking about isn't heaven - it's heaven here on this earth whenever one person helps another in need...

Others of us are like the Temple Assistant - we know the institution of the church so well we could tell you how many windows there are in St. Peter's Basilica or that there are over 34,000 different Christian denominations world-wide. We can tell you what a seeker friendly church is, what an emergent church is, the pros and cons of the social gospel movement - but again, if a hungry man stops us on the street asking for bus-fare it's like we've suddenly become mute. We're tempted to retreat into the comforts of the institution and get involved in its administration and ritual. Those are good things but again Jesus is telling us 'ETERNAL LIFE AINT THERE!

Again, I don't want to minimize the importance of either biblical knowledge or the importance of understanding what it takes to run a church. But if that's all church is to us, we haven't heard what Jesus is trying to tell us through this parable!

Parables are like puzzles...and this one is no exception.

A critical question to ask yourself whenever you're trying to interpret one of Jesus' parable is: is Jesus in this parable and if so, which one of the characters is he?

Put up your hand if you think Jesus is person # 1, the priest - so taken up with preaching a good sermon in Jericho that he doesn't have the time to care for the beaten man on the side of the road?

Or is he person # 2, the Levite so committed to fulfilling his church obligations, he has no time for the man beaten by the side of the road?

Or is he person # 3, the man despised, outside the inner circle of the church, and probably not welcomed in most churches – who suspends whatever his own personal agenda is and sacrificially give of his time and his resources to care for a perfect stranger?

Or is he person # 4, the man who was stripped of his clothes and beaten and left for half-dead on the side of the road?

3 days before Jesus himself was stripped of all his clothing and beaten and eventually crucified, Jesus told another parable about the Last Judgment where the line drawn between the blessed and the cursed is not between those who went to church and those who didn't. It's not between those whose theology was right and those whose theology was wrong – it's between those who cared for the naked and the imprisoned and the infirmed and the homeless and those who didn't.

I tell you the truth, he says, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me! (Matthew 25:40)

Somehow the Good Samaritan understood this. His theology may have been off and he may have been discouraged from attending church – but he had discovered that when you personally engage in the needs of others you become engaged in the life of God and life takes on new meaning. It passes from being trivial to being substantial, from being superfluous to being real, from being temporal to being eternal...

A couple of observations about the Good Samaritan and then you'll be given the opportunity to do likewise...

We tend to think of generosity as impulsive, a reaction to a need. We think of generosity as a trait some people have and others don't...

But the generosity of the Good Samaritan is intentional, strategic and flawless in its execution. It is both effective and efficient. It is the end result of both a good heart and good thinking!

In preparing for the 23 mile trip from Jerusalem to Jericho, he packs more oil and wine and cash than he needs. He packs a first aid kit for a trip that will take him less than a day. It's as though in preparing for the trip, he equips himself to care.

His care is personal. He puts the man on his own donkey and then takes him to an inn where he takes care of him.

And finally he involves other people – other care-givers in assisting the man to get better. He gives the innkeeper the equivalent of \$500 and promises to pay him more should his bill exceed that amount.

We are the church of the Good Samaritan. We are a people who have too much. We belong to the 5% of the world's population having 89% of the world's wealth.