

Lectionary 15 C 2016
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St. Matthew's Kellers Church
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Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen

What a week. What a gospel.

Today's gospel contains the two commandments that are key to eternal life. Plus the story of a Samaritan who is good. Oh, we need life. And we need goodness. Let us see where we will find them.

The lawyer stood up to ask Jesus a question. Very appropriate. By standing he showed honor to Jesus. He also showed honor by calling Jesus "Teacher." But his motive was not so honorable. The lawyer wanted to test Jesus, to catch him in a wrong interpretation of God's law. Jesus answered his question about what he must do to inherit eternal life by asking the lawyer a question. What was his considered opinion: "What law do you read that would lead to inheriting eternal life?" The lawyer answered as many (but not all) would have in Jesus' time: love God with your whole being (from Deuteronomy) and love your neighbor as yourself (from Leviticus). Good answer, Jesus says! So, do it!

But. The lawyer wasn't done. "Who is my neighbor?" he asked. To whom, precisely, does the law require me to show love? Most of the Jewish scriptures would indicate that the neighbor was another Jew. Some lawyers of the time would argue that the word "neighbor" would include strangers who were refugees, or those who came to Israel with a positive intent. Others would make the point that the word "neighbor" included only Jews who kept the commandments, who were righteous according to the law. Those Jews would argue that the law required you to refuse to do good to those who were ungodly; they were not neighbor. And, of course, Gentiles (non-Jews) in general were not to be regarded as neighbors. But worse than ordinary Gentiles, who were not familiar with the laws of the Torah, and did not know any of the Jewish scriptures, were the Samaritans. For the Samaritans at one time had been Jews. Then, probably after many of the Israelites were forced into

exile to Babylon, differences emerged between the Samaritians who claimed descent from Joseph, and the others descended from Jacob. The Samaritans believed the holy mountain of God was Gerizim (in Samaritan territory), not Zion (in Jerusalem). Also, the Samaritans (wrongly, according to the Jews of Jesus' time) only regarded the Torah as scripture – the first 5 books; they rejected all the writings that had anything to do with King David: the histories, the prophets, the psalms and other wisdom writings. The Jews despised the Samaritans, as you can only despise someone who used to be on your side, but no longer was. That's probably why, in our gospel a few weeks ago, James and John were so eager to ask God to rain down destruction on the Samaritan town that didn't welcome Jesus. And the Samaritans felt the same way about the Jews. Disgust.

When the lawyer asked the question, “who is my neighbor?” he probably expected a list of eligible Jews. Maybe a few, highly qualified Gentiles. And then he could get into a real argument with Jesus. Again, though, Jesus answered the lawyer's question with another question. But first Jesus told a story. It was a common enough story. About a mugging on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, and its aftermath. It was a long road, with a long history of robbers and danger. That happened to a traveler in Jesus' story. Robbed, beaten, stripped of his clothes, and left unconscious. No clothes – so no one who came by could tell where he was from (Israel or Samaria or other). Unconscious – so no one could hear his words or his accent and so tell where he was from. Jew, or not. No one could figure out if he was their neighbor. A Jewish priest went by, on his animal. Couldn't figure out if he was neighbor, so he avoided him, steering his animal away. The Levite, a lower status religious official (also familiar with the law), took a closer look; then veered away, too. Then came – who? [The Samaritan.] The Samaritan did what no other had done. The priest saw the robbed man. The Levite saw the robbed man, and came near to him. This Samaritan saw him, came near him, and Jesus notes, “was moved with pity.” Perhaps the Samaritan, too, had been a victim of crime. Whatever. But deep feeling for the injured individual came over him. And the Samaritan, at much risk to his own life and property, restored the traveler who had been mugged. He treated the wounds. He placed the

man on his own animal, taking him to an inn (to civilization!), and cared for him there. After restoring the man's health, and safety, the Samaritan even restored his money, leaving extra with the innkeeper, and promising more, if needed.

It was after this story that Jesus asked the lawyer a second question, in response to the lawyer's question of who was his neighbor: which of the three travelers on the road was neighbor to the man who had been mugged? Not, was the unidentifiable man neighbor, but who was neighbor to the unidentifiable man. And the lawyer was forced to admit – [*wait for it*]. But notice at verse 37, the lawyer could not even choke out the actual word “Samaritan.” It was so disgusting to him, so repugnant, that the Samaritan would be the hero of a story. Let alone *this* story. “The one who showed him mercy” acted as neighbor. The despised one was one who showed mercy. The despised one was the one who allowed his deep feeling of compassion to overcome all practical considerations, and to sacrifice much for his fellow human being. He treated the mugged man as someone he truly loved. Even though Samaritans do not love Jews. Not at all.

Who are we neighbor to? For whom do we feel such deep compassion, such deep love, that we will use our own time and money and energy to make their lives better? This week I can't help but hope that our national compassion will be for our dark-skinned neighbors. I pray that we can overcome our culture-taught fear of people with dark skin – especially young males with dark skin. It will not be easy, to get rid of such racial fears. It will not be easy, to assume dignity when we have been taught to fear gangsta. As it would not have been easy for the Samaritan, after the unconscious man came to his senses, and realized that a Samaritan had touched him.

And, sisters and brothers in Christ, if we do such hard work, of repenting of our racism, of seeking to understand the real griefs of those who look different than we [most of us] do – what then? Well, I tell you, the doing of such hard work will not earn you eternal life. That is already promised to us and to all sinners. But repenting of our racism and seeking to love those whose lives are so hard because of the racism of our society will make this life more full of the grace that passes all human

understanding. Our showing love, our being neighbor, especially to those different, those despised, will be the sign of God's kingdom among us. God's grace known in abundance. And how God longs for us to experience that! Amen, Lord Jesus! Let it be so!