

Thank you children for leading us so beautifully in worship this morning. Thank you to Dana and all the children's choir teachers for your hard work throughout the year. Mothers, many of whom I realize are bringing their kids to children's church now, thank you for the gift of your children. Happy Mother's Day! What a special blessing it is to hear children to make a joyful noise to the Lord. God bless you all for allowing us that blessing today.

So we've already heard one version of the Good Samaritan this morning. Let's listen to the version recorded in scripture from Luke chapter 10. No hee-haw's in this one, but it's just as compelling.

*Luke 10:25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 27 He answered, "You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself." 28 And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." 29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30 Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" 37 He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."*

This is the word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

Today we continue our sermon series "Rules to Live By" with the second of Wesley's rules for a life of discipleship. Last week, David preached on "Do No Harm" and today we focus on its corollary. Wesley's second rule<sup>1</sup> is this: Do Good.

I want to begin with a counter example from the headlines this week, a modern-day not-so-good Samaritan. Here's how NOT to do good.<sup>2</sup> On Monday a disabled woman in Asheville was in a minor car accident that left her stranded on I-26. The owner of a tow truck company showed up and began hooking up her car to tow it. But then he noticed a bumper sticker and political sign for a candidate he didn't like. So he promptly unhooked her car and left her stranded on the side of the road, where she waited in the heat for four hours before another company came and helped her out. Now, it's his business, and he has a right to refuse service. He didn't break any laws. But is this really where we've come to as a society – that political differences exempt us from helping others in need? That's ridiculous! Please don't be like that! Jesus calls us to a much better way of living in this world. Jesus calls us to love our neighbors...no matter what they think.

Do good, says John Wesley. I must confess, having been raised in the Lutheran church, I reflexively cringe a little bit when I hear those words. As a young Lutheran, I was warned time and again about *the Catholics*. I was told they thought they could earn their way into heaven by doing good works. In scripture, the book of James (2:17) says, "Faith without works is dead." I was taught to be very suspicious of that passage. Martin Luther was, after all. He reportedly once said he wished the book of James had been left out of the bible entirely! As a kid, I felt like it was almost dangerous for me to do any good works, lest I be accused of thinking they were going to "get me to heaven."

So my teachers warned me against *the Catholics*, and that we can't get to heaven by doing good works. In the decades since my childhood, I've studied religion and actually developed relationships with real live practicing Catholics. I've come to find the premise of my well-intentioned Lutheran teachers to be problematic in several ways.

First, scripture calls us to be unified in our faith, not tearing each other down. Jesus earnestly prays in John 17 (v20-21) that his followers might be one, like he and his Father are one, so the world might believe. Whenever the Church fights badly against itself, we hurt our witness to God's love in the world. That's true when we speak ill of other churches, when we clash loudly over political candidates, and when we fight unkindly over who gets to use which restroom. If we're going to argue – and we're human so we will – for God's sake let's do it with humility, love, and respect. When the rest of the world sees Christians fighting each other instead of helping those who are hurting, we miss an opportunity to share God's love with people who desperately need it. That's a sermon unto itself, and David preached that sermon beautifully last week, so I'll leave it at that.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.foxcarolina.com/story/31888456/tow-truck-owner-bernie-sanders>

My second issue with what I was told when I was younger is that the Catholic faith doesn't actually teach that we are saved by works. In fairness to my teachers, Luther had some legitimate gripes against abuses of power in his day, but those particular ones have long since been corrected. Catholics teach that salvation comes only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Just like the Lutherans, the Methodists, and all the Protestants teach. Doing good is a natural and required response to the grace and salvation we've received through faith in Christ. Catholics rightly emphasize the practice of doing good works as a result of faith in Jesus. God bless the Catholics.

Even Luther himself once said this:<sup>3</sup> "Faith is a living, restless thing. It cannot be inoperative. We are not saved by works; but if there be no works, there must be something amiss with faith" [Here I Stand, 259].

If there be no works, there must be something amiss with faith. Do good. It's ok! In fact, something's wrong with your faith if you don't!

There's one more subtle but very important question contained within the premise of my early teachers, and it has to do with the whole "getting into heaven" thing. Lutherans think this. Catholics think that. So the question is: who gets in to heaven? But it's more subtle than that. The question is really who are God's true children, the ones who are doing church right, the ones who are following scripture correctly? It's the same question the lawyer asked Jesus in our gospel lesson today.

*Luke 10:25<sup>4</sup> says, "Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus." The term "lawyer" could be misleading. It would be better to say "an expert in the Mosaic law" or "a religion scholar"<sup>5</sup> stood up with a question to test Jesus. This was someone who knew scripture by heart. He asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" But he already knew the answer. So Jesus asks him, "Well, how do you read the law, you're an expert in it?" And the lawyer correctly recites the two most important commandments – love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Any good Jew would have given the same answer. But then he pushes further. Remember – he stood up to test Jesus, to catch him saying something wrong or heretical.<sup>6</sup> So he asks, "And who is my neighbor?" He's actually asking the question: Who's really in? Who are the most important ones I'm called to love? Jesus, who do you say are God's true chosen people?*

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<sup>3</sup> attributed Martin Luther [Here I Stand, 259]. I found this from <http://www.aomin.org/aoblog/index.php/2007/04/03/six-points-on-luthers-epistle-of-straw/>

<sup>4</sup> Luke 10:25 NRSV

<sup>5</sup> The Message translation says it this way

<sup>6</sup> Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, p 127.

This is where this story gets really interesting. First we need to pause for a little background. In 586 BC, most of the Jews were carted off to Babylon to live in captivity. There was a small group that remained in Israel. That remnant, the Samaritans, continued to worship outside Jerusalem. And in their minds they kept the Jewish faith pure and true. After the Babylonian captivity ended and the captive Jews came back and rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, they considered the Samaritans to be outsiders and not true Jews. Likewise, Samaritans believed only they were God's true chosen people. Jews and Samaritans hated each other for 600 years before Jesus lived, and that hatred is still reflected today in the tension between Israel and Palestine. We don't always understand that tension in the text when we hear the word "Samaritan."<sup>7</sup> We tend to have positive associations – the Good Samaritan, Samaritan's Purse, etc., but Jews hated Samaritans in Jesus' time.

So now let's come back to the Jewish lawyer's question to Jesus. Who is my neighbor? Just who are the true chosen people, Jesus? Who is practicing the faith correctly? Who's doing religion right?

Then Jesus tells the story. And the hero of the story isn't the religious expert. The priest and the Levite (the tribe where priests came from), the most religious people in the story, pass the other way. They're so concerned with maintaining religious purity and cleanliness that they don't even bother to check on the poor beaten man. Instead it's the hated Samaritan who is the hero. It was inconceivable to think that a Samaritan would help a Jew. It was even more inconceivable that a Samaritan was to be considered a neighbor, much less one who inherits eternal life! In fact, when Jesus asks which of the three was a neighbor, the expert in the law couldn't even bring himself to say the word "Samaritan." He says only, "The one who showed mercy." Then the kicker, the salt in the wound. Jesus says, "Go and be like him." Be like the one I hate? Ouch.

Did you notice how Jesus didn't exactly answer the question he was asked?<sup>8</sup> The lawyer asks, "Who *is* my neighbor?" Jesus doesn't answer directly. Instead he tells the story, and then asks his own question: "Which one of these *was a neighbor* to him?"

In other words, *being* a neighbor isn't about your ethnicity, tribe, or religious denomination. It isn't about where you live or how you think. It's not about who's in and who's not. It's about doing the right thing. It's about behaving in response to God's grace in your life. Being a neighbor is actively doing good. Just like faith. As Luther<sup>9</sup> said, "Faith is a living, restless thing." We're to live it out for the benefit of everyone. The fact that we're Christians should be good

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<sup>7</sup> Tom Wright, p 127.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Wright, p 128.

<sup>9</sup> "Faith is a living, restless thing." – Martin Luther

news to all our neighbors, whether they're Christian or not.<sup>10</sup> Christians are called to be good neighbors.

Bible scholar Tom Wright talks about the challenge of Jesus' parable this way. He says we've been given God's love and grace. We can use it for ourselves, to boost our sense of isolated security and purity, or we can extend that love and grace to the whole world. Then he says this:<sup>11</sup> "No church, no Christian, can remain content with easy definitions which allow us to watch most of the world lying half-dead in the road."

So you see this parable is about more than just doing good. It's about doing good to everyone – so that none would be in need and all might know and experience God's love. Everyone everywhere matters. Everyone is precious in God's sight. Every human is made in God's image. Every human – even the ones with bumper stickers you don't like, even the ones who think differently than you about human sexuality, even the ones who have different understandings of who God is and how God should be worshipped – every human is worthy of God's love and care. And as followers of Jesus, we are called to be good neighbors to everyone...even the ones we don't agree with...even the ones we don't like.

I want you to think for a moment about a neighbor you have a hard time liking. Who is it that you can't imagine sharing a conversation with, much less your resources and more importantly your love, mercy, and grace? Who is the person you could only love because Christ commands you to? Imagine that person. Can you see his or her face?

What would it look like to be a neighbor to that person this week? One of our church values asks: Have I walked with someone not like me this week? I might ask it slightly differently in light of this passage: Have I *been a neighbor* to someone not like me this week? Not so that I can get to heaven. Not because the pastor challenged me to. Simply so I can follow Jesus more closely, because I'm thankful for God's grace in my life. May God give us all a living, restless, active faith to do good and to be good neighbors. Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> This is from Rob Bell

<sup>11</sup> Quote attributed to Tom Wright. (From *Luke for Everyone*, p129)