

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

“Love your neighbor”... or the cliché is old enough that you often hear it in the old English. “Love thy neighbor.” What does this really mean? Some see it merely as an encouragement to mow your neighbor’s lawn when he’s on vacation. Or to smile and wave when you see each other outside. In modern day America we rarely see our neighbors. When we do see... or hear... them, love isn’t usually on our minds. Barking dogs, noisy children, loud parties. How can we love our neighbor when they’re a nuisance? And just who is my neighbor?

By means of a parable, Jesus gives us greater insight into what he meant when he said, Love your neighbor.

In Jesus’ ministry it often happened that his enemies asked him difficult questions. They did this in order to trap him by his own words. Each time Jesus answered their questions masterfully. Our reading for today contains one of those instances. A man who was an expert in Old Testament law asked Jesus a question. He had studied all of the Old Testament laws, rules and regulations which God had given to Moses. The story tells us he thought himself to have fulfilled those laws quite well. Nevertheless, to try to trap Jesus, he asked, **“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”**

Apparently this man didn’t realize the contradiction in his question. An inheritance is not something you earn. It’s something that is given. Yet this man asked what he must do to inherit! Jesus doesn’t draw attention to this. Neither does Jesus directly answer the man’s question. Jesus knew the man was trying to trap him. So instead of giving opportunity for the man to argue, Jesus asked him a couple of questions.

“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” Have you ever noticed that the person asking the question is the one controlling the conversation? The man asked Jesus a question... Jesus turns the table and asks the man a question. Now he’s on the hook to answer.

He answered: **“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.’**” The man did an excellent job of summarizing God’s commands. First, God commands that we love Him. Not with a typical, earthly kind of love, but with complete love. God demands a love which involves the whole person – the intellect, emotions, will – our whole life. Nothing in our life should receive a love comparable to the love we should have for God. Anything less than this complete love involving our whole being is a criminal act against the Lord our God.

But that is only half of what God commands. He also commands that we love our neighbor as ourselves. As much as you care for your own needs... as much as you think of your own good... as much time and effort you spend on your own wellness... so much should you love your neighbor.

How did Jesus respond to the man’s answer? He simply said, **“You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.”** What a surprise Jesus’ response must have been! In fact, it’s even a surprise to us! Jesus didn’t attempt to debate with the man. He didn’t begin a long philosophical evaluation of the man’s answer. Instead Jesus simply agreed with him. In essence, Jesus said to him, “You are perfectly right! Keep on doing what you said (without break, omission, or fault), and you will have eternal life.”

Now wait... didn't Jesus say that we can be saved by what we do? Didn't he say that if we keep God's law, we will have eternal life? Yes, he did. And it's true. If you would love God perfectly all your life. If you every single day loved your neighbor as you love yourself, you would earn eternal life. But can we do what Jesus said? Can we love God perfectly? We can't even love God perfectly for one day. When we *worry*, we reveal that we don't believe God is all powerful. When we *fail to hear* God's voice in Holy Scripture, we do not love him perfectly. When we *fail to pray* to God regularly, our sinfulness is evident. I have shown how we fail to love God perfectly, and so we fail to do what is necessary to inherit eternal life.

But this first part of God's law didn't seem to bother the law expert. He must have felt he had kept that part. Instead, he decided to focus on the second law – love your neighbor as yourself. He seemed to suspect that he hadn't kept that part of God's law perfectly. And so he asked Jesus, **“And who is my neighbor?”** Jesus used a story to illustrate who our neighbor is.

Jesus said: **“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.”** The road between Jerusalem and Jericho was known to be dangerous and full of bandits. The two cities were about 17 miles apart. Jerusalem is over 2000 feet above sea level. Jericho about 800 feet below sea level, so the road included a descent of over some 3,000 feet. It was a winding, treacherous road with crags and hiding places. In Jesus' day it was called “The Way of Blood.” Although Jesus' story was most likely imaginary, it was certainly something well-known. This traveler fell victim to robbers, was beaten almost until he was dead, and had everything (even his clothes) stolen.

A priest happened to be going down the same road. When he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

Jesus picked the two most respected people in society at that time. Just as today, priests were looked upon highly and revered. If anyone was close to God, if anyone would show love, surely it would be a priest! But when the priest saw the poor condition of this man, he moved over to the other side of the road so that he would not even walk near the man. Perhaps he was hurrying to some relative's house having completed the temple sacrifices in Jerusalem. In any event, he didn't help the injured man. A Levite also walked by the man and didn't help him in any way. A Levite was one who worked in the temple. He was also highly regarded in society. Would no one help the man? Jesus continued his story:

“But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him.” Samaritans lived in a country neighboring Israel. Israelites hated Samaritans. There was dispute as to whether they were Jewish, or whether they were transplants brought in when the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. Odds the transplants intermarried with the Jews that weren't deported to become the Samaritans. In any event, their religion was as mixed as their blood. They claimed to be the true Jewish people and the real keepers of God's law. It was a mixture of the 5 books of Moses and the teachings and beliefs of other religions. The Jews so hated the Samaritans that they even refused to accept Samaritans into the Jewish faith if they wished to convert. To the Jew, there was no one worse than a Samaritan. And most Samaritans would have felt the same way about Jews. That's precisely why Jesus chose a Samaritan to be the one who showed love in this story. A Samaritan did what outstanding Jews refused to do. Jesus was attempting to shatter this man's self-righteousness.

The Samaritan was filled with deep pity for the beaten man. Unlike the priest and the Levite, his heart went out to the man and he felt compassion on him. He treated the man's wounds, put him on his donkey (while he himself walked), and took him to the nearest inn. But that's not all he did.

“The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’” The Samaritan paid enough for the man to recover at the inn for almost 2 months. And if that weren't enough, the Samaritan promised to return and reimburse any additional expenses. The Samaritan clearly loved his neighbor as himself.

After telling this story, Jesus draws one more answer from the law expert. Jesus asks, **“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”** The expert in the law replied, **“The one who had mercy on him.”** [Notice how he can't bear to say “the Samaritan”?] **Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”** In this way, Jesus answered the man's question, “Who is my neighbor?” In short, Jesus essentially said, “Anyone, anywhere whom you may happen to meet at any time is your neighbor. That is who is meant in the command, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Now, let's look at this whole event one more time, but this time let's ask two important questions: First, what was Jesus trying to teach this man? And second, what does Jesus want to teach us through this incident?

Through his questioning Jesus was trying to teach the man that he was not as righteous as he presumed to be. This man is typical of all who are self-righteous. They incorrectly think that they will get to heaven if they partially fulfill and outwardly observe God's law. In general, they think if they just do their best, God will grant them eternal life. But this is simply not the case. Complete love and perfect fulfillment of the law are required for eternal life. That is what Jesus illustrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus said, “If you want to keep the law perfectly, then you even have to love Samaritans as you love yourself.” We're not told how the man responded to Jesus' words, but every indication is that the man still did not recognize he was sinful.

What does Jesus say to us through this story? Jesus says the same thing. He points out that our love for God and love for our neighbor have fallen short of what God demands. He condemns us for our lack of love. Have you always loved God perfectly, and with your whole being ever since you were born? Have you continuously, throughout your life loved your neighbor just as much as you loved yourself? Have you always done everything in your power to help all you come into contact with – even complete strangers? ...even your enemy? We can't even love those who are near and dear to us in this way, can we? Much less can we love strangers in that way! How often haven't we put our own needs, convenience or time schedule ahead of others? When we read this story, we feel guilty. And if we don't, there is something very wrong with us spiritually.

In this sermon, as I've pointed out how people have a lack of love for God, or for their neighbor, did you find yourself thinking about all the other people who are loveless? Did you think, “I sure hope so-and-so was listening about being loveless because this applies to him/her exactly!” And did you think, “I remember that one time so-and-so sinned exactly how pastor was describing. There sure are lots of loveless people!” It's easy for us to see the lovelessness in others. But Jesus asks us to consider our own sin. Don't think about others for now. Think about how you yourself have failed to meet God's perfect measure of love. Each of us is guilty. Let's Jesus' message touch your heart. Say to yourself, “I have failed to show love. I am like the priest and the Levite in Jesus' parable. I do not deserve eternal life. I am unable to meet God's perfect demands.” Say to yourself now, “Lord have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Apparently, the law expert didn't say such words, if he had, he would have heard some very comforting words from Jesus. He would have heard who Jesus really is and why he came. A

paraphrase of the Bible called *The Message* expresses John 1:14 this way: **“The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.”** That’s Jesus! Loving God and loving neighbor perfectly! Jesus says to those who approach him with repentant hearts... Jesus says to us, **“I am the way and the truth and the life”** (Jn 14:6). He says, **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”** (Matthew 11:28). He says, **“I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved (Jn 10:9). I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (Jn 10:11). I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full (Jn 10:10).”** Jesus our loving Savior has promised that his perfect love is credited to us. And his death on the cross was to pay the penalty for all our acts of lovelessness. Through Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven.

When we hear of our Savior’s unconditional love for us, and when we hear of his great sacrifice to remove our sin, then we are ready to listen with a new heart to Jesus’ instruction about love. As the apostle John writes, **“We love because he first loved us”** (1 Jn 4:19). Since we know Jesus’ self-sacrificial love for us, this empowers us to show the same type of love to all we come into contact with.

Can you think of anyone who has insulted you? Offended you? Hurt you in some way? Love that person just as Jesus loved you. And if that’s hard for you to do, then spend a day or two meditating on how much you have hurt Jesus through your own sinfulness. Yet God unconditionally and completely loves you and showed his kindness by sacrificing his very Son for you! Rejoice in his love! Then see how easy it is to love the person who has hurt you or offended you in any way! The love of Jesus empowers and motivates us to love others. If we find it difficult to love others, then we either don’t understand our own sinfulness, or we don’t understand Christ’s great sacrifice to forgive our sins. When we dwell on the love of Christ, loving others is not hard work or a difficult cross for us to bear. Quite the opposite! It becomes our urgent desire and greatest joy.

Dear friends, Jesus has taught us a lot about love today. He condemned us for our lack of love, showed us his boundless, forgiving love for us, and empowered and motivated us to now show the kind of love he desires. When the service ends today, take this message home with you in your heart. Remember it, and dwell on it. Make a point this week of loving your family, your neighbors, your fellow members of this church. Why? To joyfully thank Jesus for the undeserved love which he showed us. Go in peace and love one another with the love of Christ. Amen.