

Sermon: **Good Guys – Bad Guys**

Text: Luke 10:25-37

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**INTRODUCTION TO THE READING: Luke 10:25-37**

Our gospel lesson involves a very intriguing interchange between Jesus and a lawyer. He is not a lawyer as might be in our civil court system. He is a scribe; an expert in the Law of Moses involved in codifying and interpreting the laws of God. His role is an important one that carries a lot of authority. In the course of this Q & A session Jesus tells the parable we have come to call “The Good Samaritan”.

Now if you think this is nothing more than a lovely story about helping elderly women across the street or coaching a nice young boy toward a Boy Scout award, you have another thing coming. Hear the reading.

**SERMON:**

A clergy friend of mine was recently complaining, in a light hearted way, about the people who come up to him at receptions after weddings and funerals with questions that aren't really questions, but tend to be self-validating and self-justifying statements. “Say, Reverend, do you really think you have to attend church services to be a good Christian?” “Ya' know, Reverend, I'm a deeply spiritual person, but I don't have much time for the religious stuff you're involved in.” I think some folks just like to take on the clergy. I guess they somehow feel affirmed by having said such to a clergyperson.

Some time ago a man came up to me after a funeral service and said, “So, Reverend, when did we change the Word of God?” I didn't know we had. “Well”, he replied, “somebody changed the words of that Psalm you read. That's not what I read in *my* bible.” What he was referring to as *his* bible was the King James Version, and I had read from the New Revised Standard Version. He was quite upset, rambling on about how we were adding to and taking from the Word of God, only to make it say what we want it to.

I explained that yes, the English parlance of the newer translations is a bit different, in order to be more easily read and understood by people today, but in fact the translators of some of these newer translations had access to the discoveries of some ancient and older manuscripts that were not available to the translators of the King James Version. So the changes made were not an attempt to alter the Word of God but rather an attempt to reach back to the older and more reliable texts now available, and as a result some of these newer translations are no doubt more accurate renderings than the King James Version.

Well, he didn't want to hear that at all. He let me know that as far as he was concerned, the KJV had stood the test of time and he was going to stick with it. I assured him that he would not go wrong.

In our lesson a lawyer comes to Jesus with a question. “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” In and of itself it's a valid question; a very important question that lies at the heart of all true religion. But Luke notes that his intent in asking the question was to test Jesus. “So, Teacher; Reverend, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

He's a lawyer, a scribe; one who codifies and interprets all the Mosaic Law. He's an expert in the law, and is exceedingly religious in keeping the law. He has, no doubt, done as much and more than most everyone else to suit himself for eternal life, and he knows it.

His question is more of a self-validating statement than an honest inquiry to gain understanding. Jesus senses this and responds with another question. “You're the lawyer, what does the law say?”

The lawyer replies with a recitation of a known summation of the law. It included part of the Shema that every devout Jew repeated daily. “*You shall love the Lord your God with all our heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind*”, and then this addition, “*and your neighbor as yourself.*” It's the same summation that Jesus once spoke.

Jesus said to the lawyer, "You have given the right answer." He had indeed. He was right!

There's something about being right, isn't there. It feels good to be right. It's quite self-assuring and validating. Come on, admit it; don't you just love to win an argument? Let's be honest. Sometimes we get in a snit over something of very little consequence, but after it's gone on a while winning becomes more important than whatever it is we're arguing about. Perhaps the most self-fulfilling statement in the English language is, "I told you so."

Here's a man who lives by right answers, so he needs right answers. He lives in the courts, so to speak, back in the stacks, deciphering right from wrong, legal from illegal, exacting truth and justice according to the Law of Moses. He needs to know. And he no doubt needs to be validated in what he knows and confirmed in his right-ness.

So I expect he's feeling pretty good about himself just now. He's quite satisfied with himself as he turns to go his way, rehearsing in his mind all that has just been said and savoring the fact that his discussion with Jesus has gone so well. It seems that the conversation is over, but before he's completed a full 180, he hears Jesus add... "Do this, and you will live."

Ouch! He has the first part down pretty well. He can honestly say that he loves the Lord with all his heart, soul, strength and mind, but he seems to be haunted by that "love-your-neighbor" addendum. That's the stinger. So he asks another question, "And who is my neighbor?"

Luke says, "But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" The lawyer, the expert in the law says, "Who exactly are the people I must love? What are the boundaries here? How big is my neighborhood supposed to be?"

The lawyer has now moved beyond self-validation to self-justification. He seeks safety in the law, embracing boundaries and codifying discipleship. His religion is a house of legal cards. He doesn't want to mess with the truth because he can't afford to be wrong. His system of religion is too brittle to entertain the possibility of being wrong in any respect. So he asks, "And just who *is* my neighbor?"

Jesus responds as he often did, with a parable. He draws in the lawyer with a story that will mess with his system of thinking and, worse, with his attitude and behavior.

You know the story well. It's one of those good guy – bad guy stories. We like those kinds of stories, don't we. As a kid, I played cops and robbers with my friends on the streets of Ambridge, Pennsylvania. Court TV programs get big play now, because we love to see the bad guy get what's coming to him and we want to see the good guy vindicated. And we seem to especially like the mystery stories. You never know who are the good guys and who are the bad guys until the end of the story and it's usually a complete surprise.

The story Jesus tells was like that for this lawyer... ending in a complete surprise.

There are four characters. The first is a Jewish traveler lying in the ditch, robbed, beaten and left for dead. Next is a priest, one of the highest religious leaders among the Jewish people. Then comes a Levite, one dedicated to the service of God in the temple and helping the priests. Finally we have a Samaritan. Samaritans were half-breed people and despised by the Jewish people of Jesus day. They had refused to participate in the restoration of Jerusalem and had, in fact, aided Syrian leaders in wars against the Jews.

So who are the good guys and who are the bad guys here? If you had been one of those hearing Jesus tell this for the first time, there would have been no doubt in your mind. The religious leaders and practitioners are the good guys and the Samaritan is the bad guy. It was the way life was cast... no question about it.

But the question that prompted the parable was not, Who are the good guys and who are the bad guys, or who are Jewish and who are Samaritan. The lawyer's question was, "Who is my neighbor?" After telling the story Jesus returns the question to the lawyer, "Who was the neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? Who was the one who came to the aid of your fellow Jew in the ditch?"

The... Samaritan?!? This is the hard part of the story. Here's the singer. Isn't he supposed to be the bad guy? I don't think the lawyer is quite able to say it was the "Samaritan", but he gets the point. He said, "The one who showed him mercy."

Jesus said, "You got it! The Samaritan is your neighbor. He's the one who showed mercy to one of yours. He's your neighbor!"

Now here's the hard part for us. Here's the stinger. *Let's* ask Jesus this question, "Who is *my* neighbor?"

There are, by law, a lot of "bad guys" out there, no doubt. By their behavior they have demonstrated themselves as evil-doers. There are those who are against you and me and are intent to kill us. Are *they* our neighbors?!?

Who is *your* neighbor? How big is *your* neighborhood? I can't answer for you. I can only answer for myself. But I have two more questions for you to consider if you are willing to sincerely ask, "Who is my neighbor".

The first is this. Is my willingness to be changed in my attitude as great as my desire to be validated in my viewpoint?

The second is this. (It comes from Amy-Jill Levine, professor at Vanderbilt Divinity School.) Is there anyone from any group that you don't like and you'd rather die than have to acknowledge they have helped you and shown you mercy? Is there anyone of any group who might rather die than help you?

That's *your* Samaritan. And that's your neighbor.

It's downright scandalous, isn't it? It was just that scandalous for the lawyer in Jesus' day. But the injunction of Jesus about showing mercy still stands. "Go and do likewise."

All I can say is, ouch and amen.