

EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Luke 10:25-37

“What shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

1. The wrong question.
2. The right answer.

As we begin a new era here together at Christ, both you and I have a lot of questions? What will the new pastor be like? Will he be a good preacher? How long will the services be? Is he going to bring in new, younger members? What will the congregation be like? Are they going to fight me on everything? Will they be supportive of my ministry? How mature are they in the faith? Today is a day of questions, but none of them are as important as the one the lawyer asks Christ in the Holy Gospel: “*What shall I do to inherit eternal life?*” Unfortunately, as we will see, it is the wrong question. Fortunately for us, however, in the Gospel we will find the right Answer.

St. Luke makes no bones about it, this man asked this question to test Jesus. The lawyer wanted to flaunt his own knowledge and piety at the same time that he wanted to stump Jesus. Jesus gave the lawyer the answer he wanted, but he did it as a rebuke. The lawyer had asked, “*What shall I do to inherit eternal life?*” The Greek word he used is in a tense that hints at a one-time, completable action which the lawyer had or could accomplish to get his salvation done and out of the way. The lawyer wanted a laundry list of works that would earn him paradise. Playing into the lawyer’s desire to show off, Jesus replies, “*What is written in the Law? How do you read it?*” And then, “*You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.*”

There is something sublime in Jesus’ answer, however. When Jesus says, “*Do this,*” He does not use the same tense as the lawyer had used. Remember, the lawyer wanted a laundry list of works he could do to get the requirements for heaven out of the way. He wanted some one-time, completable actions. Jesus uses a different tense. He in essence says, “*Do this continually, habitually, and always, and you will live.*” Jesus is rebuking the lawyer, showing him his arrogance for presuming he could keep God off his back with a few trite deeds. Jesus says, “*No, if you want to be saved by doing things, do everything, all the time, and without failure, and only then will you be saved.*”

The Lawyer noticed Jesus’ subtle rebuke, or at least felt Jesus should praise him more, and thus he tried “*to justify himself.*” He asks, “*And who is my neighbor.*” Jesus wastes no time. Here comes our parable. The point of the parable is clear. Our neighbor is anyone and everyone with a beating heart and a bodily or spiritual need. God’s law is not conditional. It is not a buffet where we pick a lot of what we like and a little of what we don’t. We can’t say, “Give me two scoops of love one another, a slab of don’t judge, and a heap of do unto others, but none of that sexual immorality, crude language, and respect for life; that’s not for me and it is quite frankly outdated.” No, God’s law is served pre-packaged. Everyone gets everything. As St. James says, “*For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.*” Someone who tells you they are going to heaven because they have kept most of God’s law is as foolish as a person with cancer and pneumonia telling you they are in pretty good health because they don’t have West Nile.

Jesus knew this lawyer thought he was successfully fulfilling the letter of God’s law. Jesus knew the lawyer thought he was getting this heaven thing done on his own; and so Jesus introduced the lawyer to the spirit of the law. Jesus tells a parable where the hero and true neighbor is a Samaritan, a race of people hated by most Jews. This was a slap in the face. After all, who were the people who passed by the man in need? It was the dream team of Judaism: a priest and a Levite. These were the cream of the religious crop in the Jewish mind. These were the clergy.

We, as Christians, many of us as life-long Christians, can often become self-righteous and condescending toward the outside world and each other, much like the lawyer in our Gospel. We can revel in our fellow Christians’ sins instead of rejoicing in their forgiveness. Rather than looking upon the unbeliever’s spiritual need with compassion, we are tempted to look upon their depravity with

disgust; but what can we really expect from those separated from God besides sin and depravity. With time, we can start to forget what really separates us from the world outside these walls. It is not the holiness of our lives, but the faith that has taken hold of us through Word and Sacrament. If our lives were reality shows, broadcast 24/7, the world would in many cases see little difference between us and them. Sure, we don't commit some of the "big sins" they do—the easy sins to pick on because most of us are not even tempted by them, but we are still prone to all sorts of sin in thought, word and deed. We sometimes, like that lawyer, need to be reminded that "*What shall I do to inherit eternal life*" is the wrong question, because on our own, apart from Christ, all we can do is sin, and sin earns us an entirely different inheritance.

When I first looked at today's lessons, I was sure I was going to pick a different text for my first sermon here. I thought that this week's readings were too much law, especially the Holy Gospel; but the gospel was right in front of my face the whole time. He was right in front of the lawyer's face. Jesus is the Gospel in this lesson. Jesus is the Answer to the question. He is the true neighbor, the Samaritan, who kept not only the letter of the law, as the lawyer did, but also the spirit of the law. He was the one who had given the law in the first place. He was the one whom the law foreshadowed. He is the LORD.

Yes, the Holy Gospel today is full of law. It shows us we are just as helpless in sin as that man in the parable was helpless in his wounded state; but we have a spiritual Samaritan, who has found us in need, raised us up on His mighty shoulders, and carried us over from death to life. He washes our nasty wounds of unrighteousness with the waters of Holy Baptism. He treats the debilitating disease of sinfulness with the medicine of immortality, His very Body and Blood. He pays the price for our entrance into heaven out of His own account, giving His life for ours, taking our death upon Himself. He leaves instructions for our care, reminding us of His love and mercy in His Word, constantly calling us back from death to life, from sin to grace, from the wide road to the narrow one. He is the one who shows mercy.

What does this have to do with this new ministry beginning here at Christ Lutheran? Everything. We are sent to be neighbors. We are sent to see the most desperate needs of those around us and to address them. The most desperate need will always be the same: law, quickly followed by the gospel. There will be plenty of needs that will at times seem more pressing and distract us. Building projects, budget crunches, family issues, programs, boards, and everything else under the sun will cry out in desperate need and demand our immediate attention. But symptoms must never be mistaken for the disease. I am sure that traveler lying half-dead on the side of the road may have needed a haircut, a new saddle for his donkey, or a DVD player. More importantly, however, he needed his wounds bound, to be taken to safety, and to find shelter where he could rest.

You have called me here to do the same. I am here to bind your spiritual wounds, which means, at times, I will have to tell you that you're sick, whether or not you want to hear it. Only when sin is identified as sin will the sinner realize his need for grace. I am here to bring you to safety: to the font, to the altar, to the Word. I am here to give you rest, rest found only in the grace and mercy of our True Neighbor, our Lord Jesus Christ. I will not be perfect. At times, I will fail to speak when I should. At times, I will speak when I should not. But I am not what's important. Jesus Christ, the gospel in our Holy Gospel, is what's important. Know that when I baptize, when I commune, when I preach, when I absolve, I am not baptizing, communing, preaching, or absolving at all, but rather Jesus Christ, who called me through you, by the Holy Spirit, is baptizing, communing, absolving, and preaching through me. And Jesus Christ, not Pastor Johnston, is what you will gather for every Sunday. The lawyer was not the answer. You are not the answer. I, apart from my call, am not the answer. Jesus Christ is the only right Answer. "*What shall I do to inherit eternal life?*" We shall do nothing, because we can do nothing. Jesus Christ has done it all, and that is why it is such a joy to serve Him with our entire life. Amen.