

"Stepping over the Line" Luke 10:25-37 Trinity 13 2023

Friends, may grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Today we hear Jesus' very familiar parable of the Good Samaritan. He tells the story to answer a question about lines.

A man described as a lawyer has approached Jesus and asked him a question. He isn't what we picture as a lawyer today: someone well versed at our nation's laws who counsels and represents clients in legal matters. This man is a religious lawyer. He's dedicated his life to the study of the first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy. These books are known as the Torah. It means "teachings" or "the law."

This religious scholar has studied all the finer points of Moses' law. He knows it inside and out. He carefully follows all the mandates as written in the scriptures. Here's a guy who colors within the lines. He's very meticulous about following exactly how the law should be applied in every situation imaginable. How many steps can you take on the Sabbath? What do you need to do if you've touched a dead person? What's the proper way to clean your pots? This is how he shows his love for the Lord – by following God's commands.

He asks Jesus a question to test him. It's a fairly simple question. It's more like a Sunday School question, not a doctoral thesis question.

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The lawyer basically served up a fat pitch to Jesus. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus responds with a very basic answer: Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself. Boom. It's the two tables of the 10 commandments distilled into their most fundamental essence. Jesus' answer is extremely orthodox. He learned his catechism as a young boy, and he's answering straight from his catechism. This is as basic and as fundamental as it gets: love God, love your neighbor. The law boils down to love.

And then the man asks a follow-up question. And Luke tells us something very interesting. This man wants to justify himself. He wants to be found standing on the right side of the line. He wants his actions to be judged correct and true within God's law.

But when it comes to how he treats his neighbor, well, he's not so sure. It depends on who exactly is defined as his neighbor. Where is the line drawn on who qualifies as a neighbor?

The biblical lawyer wants to justify himself. His follow-up question is very lawyerly. The law is one thing. How we interpret its meaning is very much another! This is true for how we interpret God's law and also for our secular laws, too. Lawyers – and judges – can warp and distort the law towards their own desired ends. The law seems like an indelible

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line etched in stone. But it's possible to bend the hard line of the law through our interpretations.

This is exactly what the lawyer wants to do. Reading between the lines, we can infer that he hasn't exactly treated everyone kindly. His conscience is troubled. But depending upon the definition of "neighbor" his actions might be just. So, he asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" He wants to define the boundary line of who qualifies as a neighbor (and therefore falls under the law) and those who stand on the other side of the neighborly line (and so NOT under the law).

He tosses out his follow-up question and hopes Jesus will take the bait: hook, line, and sinker. But instead, Jesus turns the question on its side.

Jesus tells the lawyer a story about a man accosted by robbers and left for dead. Who should come along that same lonely road but two holy men! First one and then another. Certainly, one these good, godly men will throw him a lifeline and help!

But this man lies in a ditch, half dead. Half-dead means he's probably unconscious, he's not moving. By the looks of him, he could be dead. And if these holy men touch a dead person, they won't be ritually clean for religious observations. Each man veers over to the far side of the road and pass by him.

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Finally, a Samaritan's travels take him down this same stretch of road. Samaritans were despised by Jews because of their impure bloodline. During the time of the Babylonian captivity, their Jewish ancestors had married non-Jews. Samaritans still worshiped the God of Abraham, but their worship was corrupted and their bloodline impure.

And yet, this despised Samaritan is the individual who draws near to the wounded man! He goes above and beyond to assist him.

Jesus poses a question of his own to the lawyer. Now Jesus is the teacher and the lawyer is the catechist. But instead of repeating "who is my neighbor," Jesus reframes the question. He asks, "Who acted like a neighbor?"

When he answers, the lawyer can't even bring himself to say the word "Samaritan." You get the sense that he doesn't place the Samaritans under the category of "neighbor." He can't even say "Samaritan." Instead, he says, "The one who showed mercy."

If this learned man had read his scriptures – and he has – certainly, he would have known the biblical mandate to care for the stranger in your midst:

"When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the

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citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." (Lev. 19:33-34)

"For the Lord your God ... loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Deut. 10:17-19)

The biblical mandate to love our neighbor doesn't draw distinctions. Love calls us to impartiality. Love impels us to cross every humanly construed boundary. It urges us to draw near enough to recognize our neighbor in the eyes of the stranger. And as we draw even closer, our neighbor will be revealed to bear the image of God.

Love impels us to cross the line. That is exactly what Jesus did. It was love that urged the Son of God to cross the boundary between heaven and earth. He stepped over the line and entered our realm. He came to dwell among us. In his eyes, we were not a thing to be despised; we were the object of his love. His unquenchable love compelled him even further. Our burdens became his burdens. He took the brokenness and shame and sin of the entire world and placed it upon himself. And in sharing our death, he took our sins with him to the grave.

He crossed the line from heaven to earth. Then he crossed the line from the earth to the cross. From the cross, he stepped over the line to

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the grave. And from the grave, he stepped over even one more line, from death into resurrection, into eternal life. All this he did out of love, love for us, love for you, love for me.

Love impelled Jesus to cross the line for us. That same love urges us, too. It urges us to love our neighbor. We step over the imaginary lines meant to divide, and there awaits our neighbor! Amen.