

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (8/23/20)

Jesus begins today by speaking of the great revelation and completion that he is. He brings a fullness of the revelation of God in his person (the Divine Word the second person of the Trinity incarnate), he speaks to fullness of the teaching of God in his preaching, and through his death and resurrection actually achieves the victory over sin and death that many prophets and kings longed to see. All of that may sound abstract, and we may want more practical answers.

The lawyer in the Gospel asks such a practical question *Master, what must I do to possess eternal life?* This is not the only time Jesus gets such a question - the rich young man also asks him something similar to this. With both of them he starts with requiring the following of the law, but then demands something from the heart. To the rich young man he requires him to separate his dependence and reliance on the earthly and material and rely on God *If you would be perfect, sell what you have, give it to the poor, and come and follow me.* Jesus clearly requires something beyond mere adherence to regulations - he shows what it is to love God. The case with the lawyer is different. His answer is not a list of commandments (as the rich young man's was) it is a more nuanced and spiritual understanding of the law: *Thou shall love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.* He summarizes the law in the two great commandments, as Jesus does himself in another place. However, while Jesus expands the needs to expand the first of these commandments for the rich young man (admonishing him to place God at the center of his life, and not divide his heart, mind, and will between God and earthly things), he needs to expand the second commandment for the lawyer.

The lawyer acts ... well ... like a lawyer. He seems clear about the ultimate and far reaching obligations to God, but wishes to qualify who exactly is his neighbor. He wants to know the limits of the legal obligation, he wants to know who he must care for and who he can ignore, he really is searching for how much neglect of others he can engage in and not be convicted in God's court. He places a lot of emphasis on the first commandment, but his expression of the second commandment is less specific. It uses what is really a Jewish legal term: neighbor. There were disputes in Jewish legal circles regarding how far the obligation to one's neighbor extended (and in fact, who actually was a "neighbor" or not) - he seems to want to

be sure that he knows where to draw the line - who does he have to love and who can he refrain from loving?

Jesus, in typical fashion does not answer the question directly, but responds with one of his most endearing parables: The Good Samaritan. Jesus knew this man's heart, as he knows our hearts. He knew that he had already drawn the boundaries about who was his neighbor or not, as we have as well (if we are honest with ourselves). The lawyer was merely asking for an approval of his own patterns of prejudice. His point - we are told - was to justify himself, not to gain deeper awareness of whom to love. In the parable the man who is best by robbers is clearly a Jew (returning from Jerusalem to Jericho), and we are told that the man who helps him is a Samaritan (one of those that observant Jews like the lawyer would have considered outsiders and not "neighbors"). We would expect Jesus to portray a Jew helping a Samaritan and to place this as the example. But Jesus instead shows the Jew in need of help, beaten and alone, passed over by observant Jews (his "neighbors"). It is a statement to the lawyer that whether someone is a neighbor or not does not seem to matter for the observant ones like himself. The Samaritan - who might well expect to have his eye spit into by the Jewish man when he recovers accepts the challenge of reaching past prejudice. He does not look how he is despised by the one who needs help, he takes on the inconvenience, the disruption of his life, the financial burden of caring for the man. He even displays a continued caring and obligation by promising to pay any future expenses for the Jewish man. It is a most vivid example that turns expectations on their head and presents a clear example of what Jesus will say elsewhere when he says *Love thy enemies, pray for those who persecute you*. This is a greater depth of love than doing a good thing out of a legal obligation.

Jesus' question to the lawyer is meant to change his whole frame of reference: *Which of these three, in thine opinion, was neighbor to him that fell among robbers?* He shows that who is a neighbor is not defined by lines of national origin or group membership. We do not define who and who is not our neighbor - rather the essence of neighbor is to show love and mercy to others regardless of who they are. This is hard for us, we are so used to standing our ground and doing only so much as we think we should. Jesus asks for more. He asks for total devotion to God, and he asks for us to not only regard all as neighbor, but to change our definition of what a neighbor is - changing it from one based on who the other is to a definition based on the quality of love and mercy that we show to another.