

DO THIS
Luke 10:25-42

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It's the only question that really matters. All other questions are secondary; this one question is supreme. The question was persistent, for it was posed to our Lord on more than one occasion.

In Matthew 19:16-22, the rich young ruler asks, "What shall I do to have eternal life?" (See also Matthew 22:35-40; Mark 12:28-34.)

And in our present gospel, later in Luke 18:18-23, a ruler repeats, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

Here in Luke 10, in this conversation with the counselor, Jesus answers a question with a question. There is old joke that goes: "Why does a Rabbi answer a question with a question?" The answer: "Why shouldn't a Rabbi answer a question with a question?"

The lawyer already knew the answer. Eternal life comes from perfect love toward God and perfect love toward people – your neighbor. Jesus doesn't correct him, but says, "You've answered correctly."

If I want to live forever, what do I have to do? That is the question posed in our first story this morning.

Notice carefully Christ's response. He didn't say, "Great answer. You're my best pupil," or "That's impressive." Rather, He said, "**Do this** (and you will live)."

"You have answered correctly; do this and you will live."

The priority of the pericope shifts from the love of God to love of neighbor as proof of love of God. Don't tell me you love God – show me you love God by the way you treat your neighbor. In fact, Paul himself says in Romans 13:8-9 and in Galatians 5:14, that the whole law is summed up in love of neighbor.

Of course, the lawyer is looking for a loophole. So he tries to narrow his responsibility, narrow the definition of neighbor. "Who is my neighbor?" he asks, trying to make the case that he doesn't have to care for all men, for he does not consider all men to be his neighbor.

Leviticus 19:17-18 identifies the neighbor we are to love as "a fellow Israelite," "anyone among your own people." But Leviticus 19:33-34 causes tension because it tells us to love aliens and strangers, too. "Who is my neighbor?" The debate looms large in ancient Israel.

Then the Rabbi Jesus does what Rabbi Jesus does when he wants to hit home. He tells a story, gives us a narrative about neighbors.

The context of the story is lost on us today. The Rabbi relates a story about a man who is going down from Jerusalem. Because of the height of the Holy City, one does go down when one travels away from Jerusalem in any direction. This guy is going to Jericho. And then the problem of the parable: he fell among robbers, was stripped and beaten, and left half-dead (v. 30).

Then comes a cast of characters, starting with “a certain priest.”

“A certain man” had been robbed and, now, “a certain priest” passes by.

It wasn't that he didn't see the need of his neighbor. He just chose to pass on the other side. A priest certainly couldn't come in contact with a corpse. That would defile the priest by law. Perhaps he shouldn't get too close, this might be a corpse. “I bet he is already dead,” the certain priest said. “What can I do anyway?” And away he walks.

“Likewise (v. 32), a Levite” – another religious leader, a Levite, has the same response. He “passed by on the other side.”

How many times in life have we passed by on the other side. The Levite likely had some temple responsibilities. He couldn't be bothered by the needs of a neighbor.

And finally, “a certain Samaritan.” We've had “a certain man” who was robbed, and “a certain priest” who passes by on the other side, but now we have “a certain Samaritan.” He was on a journey. Now, a Samaritan was a little bit Jewish, but not all the way Jewish. They were descendants of that mixed population occupying the land after the conquest of Assyria in 722 B.C. They had their own house of worship. They were considered social outcasts by Jews. They were half-breeds, which, in some ways, was worse than being a Gentile. So Jews just didn't jive with Samaritans. There was a long history of hatred there – we haven't the time to hear it this morning.

You notice the story turns with the adversative conjunction “but” in verse 33. “But a certain Samaritan.” In all of Jesus' parables, when he says “but,” you know he has turned the page and the meat of the matter is around the corner. But....

The Samaritan, who himself was hated by the one who had been bloodied, oddly enough saw the victim and felt compassion. “Came to him” (v. 34) – as opposed to passing on the other side. Bandaged up his wounds. Poured oil and wine on them. And put the poor man on his own beast of burden and brought him to an inn. The next day, he told the innkeeper, “I've got to be on my way. You take care of him. And whatever more you need to spend, when I return, you can count on me for the cash.”

Then Jesus poses the uncomfortable question in verse 36. “Which of these do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?”

It's not a trick question. It's obvious. There is no way to avoid it. "The one who showed mercy toward him." Then Jesus said "Go and do..." (v. 37).

The answer to eternal life, according to Jesus, is "going and doing." This is not an isolated instance in the New Testament. We are to have faith in Christ. Yet, while it is our faith that saves us, it's only the kind of faith, Jesus reminds us, that "goes and does" that can grant us eternal life. We must have the kind of faith that has weary feet from well-doing.

The only question that matters: "How do I get forever life?" The only answer: "Don't ignore your needy neighbor. Go and do. Have a faith that flourishes in works."

This is a story about crossing well-established boundaries to help people on the other side. The Jew was definitely on the other side of the Samaritan. But it was this half-breed Samaritan who did the right thing when the Jews – the priest and the Levite – left the man for dead.

One clear lesson that looms large in this passage is that God's people need to rise up in every place, in every city, everywhere, and embrace each other. If Samaritans will help Jews, and Jews will help Gentiles, we could begin a conversation centered around our Christ.

The scripture, that is, the Old Testament to Jesus, has already taught God's people not to judge others by their face, but to look at their heart. Why, God looked at the heart of a shepherd boy, David. We are the people who have the parable whereby Jews can be loved by Samaritans. We are the people in the Acts of the Apostles who have seen the Spirit of God fall upon all peoples, even a Gentile called Cornelius. And, most of all, we're the only people who know the forgiving power of the crucifixion of the Christ. We are the people who have been blessed with the power to begin again through forgiveness and reconciliation.

Every single Sunday, First Baptist Church of Amarillo preaches the gospel in six different languages. The outside world thinks that Amarillo is a West Texas town inhabited only by farmers and ranchers. They think we're only the land of the big steaks and rattlesnakes. But we know differently. We've got elementary schools where 20 different languages and dialects are spoken.

And what a great city we have. Here in Amarillo we have a long history of loving each other and caring for each other. If you look at the histories of the churches in Amarillo, we are all woven together – branches coming off the same stump.

The next time you see a man, the next time you see a neighbor from the other side waylaid on the roadway, remember the one question that matters. "Now, tell me again, Rabbi, how do I live forever? And how do I get a seat at the big banquet that lasts forever?"

"Do this."

Faith – yes, of course, faith, but only a faith that changes how I treat my neighbor. Jew or Gentile, African-American or Laotian or Burmese or Latino, Congolese or Somalian, Vietnamese or new immigrants from Afghanistan or the Ukraine, we cannot pass by on the other side.

There is a second story, back-to-back, in Luke 10 that concludes the chapter. Look at verses 38-42.

“Now as they were traveling along, He entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. And she had a sister named Mary, who, moreover, was listening to the Lord’s word, seated at His feet. But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him and said, ‘Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Tell her to help me.’ And Jesus answered and said to her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only a few things are necessary – really only one – for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her.’”

This story, side by side – in fact, the closing story of the Good Samaritan story doesn’t say, “do this.” It says, “listen and learn.”

We know from John’s Gospel that Mary and Martha are the sisters of Lazarus, and that they were some of the very best friends of our Lord. He stayed in their home on more than one occasion. But I don’t want you to miss the radical nature of the story. Jesus is invited into a woman’s home. No mention is made in the Gospel about her brother, Lazarus, being present. He teaches a woman. Rabbis did not allow women to sit at their feet. They did not allow women to be their disciples. However, as we have already seen in Luke’s Gospel (Luke 8:1-3), women were counted among the most important of Jesus’ followers. Much is made about their role throughout the story of His life, including the grandest event – the Resurrection – which is first proclaimed by a woman.

You may or may not like that, but those are undeniable New Testament facts. Neither Jesus nor Paul was busy shutting women out of the inner circles of discipleship. They were busy welcoming women in. So the same Jesus who sits down with a woman and talks with her at the well now spends some time with two sisters – Mary and Martha.

I can just see Martha now. She is working in the kitchen. She has a green bean casserole ready. You know, the kind with the crispy onions on top. She’s trying to get it out of the oven and set it over to stay warm until she is able to pop in the dinner rolls. The brisket was ready to go, but the meringue on the coconut pie had yet to be browned. Of course, the sink was absolutely full of dishes. She was up to her elbows in soap suds. It was just one of those occasions when you don’t need two hands, but you need six hands to help.

“Where is Mary, anyway? And why doesn’t she get in here and help me in the kitchen? Doesn’t she know I am preparing a meal for our friend, for our Lord?” About that time, she takes her shoulder and wipes the sweat from her brow, clangs some dishes – hoping, perhaps, that Mary will hear them, come to her senses, and come to her aid. But Mary just sits.

Look at verse 39. Mary just sits at Jesus’ feet, listening to the Lord teach. Listening – I love the way Luke puts it – to the Lord’s word.

But not Martha. Martha wasn’t listening. Martha wasn’t learning. Martha was doing.

Look at verse 40.

Can't the Lord see what's going on here? Can't He know how Mary is treating me? "Lord, tell my sister to come in here and help. Doesn't it matter to You that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone. Tell her to help me."

Martha just seems to me to be one of those women who makes everything difficult. She couldn't have Him over for just a simple one-dish chicken casserole. It had to be complicated. There had to be course after course, an appetizer and entree and side dishes, each one made to absolute perfection. Then the dessert. Martha just makes things hard.

Some of you are like that. You can't relax and enjoy your company when you are serving them. You have to make things difficult. Martha would never have said, "There's the tea pitcher, help yourself." She would have been up and down, waiting, serving, and pouring glasses the whole time during the meal.

"Lord, it's not fair. Do something about it. Tell my sister to help me."

But Jesus makes an interesting response. "Martha, Martha." I like the way he says it twice. "Martha, Martha" (v. 41), you are worried and bothered about so many things. Life doesn't have to be this complicated, Martha. I don't care whether you have a dessert or not. I just like being with you and Mary. I like being with my friends. Actually, Martha, I wish you would quit worrying about the meal and sit down and you, too, would partake of the word of God like your sister. Martha, only a few things are necessary, and only one thing is really needful. 'We do not live by bread alone, but out of every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord' (Deuteronomy 8:3; Luke 4:4). Martha, the real, true bread is right here in your home – the bread of life, My words, the words of your Lord. How can you be worried about overcooking the pasta? Mary has made the better choice. The things you are preparing will perish. But what she has chosen – hearing and receiving the word of the Lord – can never be taken away from her."

Some of you need the first story of Luke 10, you need to hear "go and do." And there are others of you who need to hear the words "listen and learn."

What it means to be a followers of Christ is not simply doing, though that is an important part. But it also means, essentially, being. We can "do," but if we do not "be" then we have missed the essence of God's Kingdom altogether. And yet one cannot be without, in the end, doing.

I think Luke put these stories side by side on purpose.

So which story is for you this morning, "Go and do" or "Listen and learn"? Whoever you are, wherever you are and however you are, one of these is the word of the Lord for you.

"Do this" and "listen and learn."