

“Do This and You Will Live”  
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
July 13, 2019

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Psalm 82  
Luke 10:25-37

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is a classic Christian story, and one worth repeating over and over again. Even though I preached this same text 3 years ago and could have chosen one of the other lectionary texts, I chose this one because we need to hear it again and again, until the words get written on our hearts and we cannot help but be shaped by them.

Have you noticed the small boxes many Jews post on their door frames? On the outside, they usually contain one Hebrew letter, the Shin. It is the first letter of the scroll that nests on the inside, “Shema Yisrael: <sup>4</sup>Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>5</sup>*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*” These verses are from the book Deuteronomy, and that book of the bible continues to instruct: “<sup>6</sup>Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. <sup>7</sup>Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. <sup>8</sup>Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem<sup>[b]</sup> on your forehead, <sup>9</sup>and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

So, when the lawyer approached Jesus asking him what he should do to inherit eternal life, Jesus turns the question back to him: what does the law say? And right away, the lawyer recites from the Shema Yisrael. But he does not stop there. He adds to it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This commandment also comes from the Torah, in Leviticus 19:17-18: “You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. <sup>18</sup>You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.” Here, it seems to be speaking of protecting your kin, your neighbor, *your* people. But Leviticus continues to tell us, “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. <sup>34</sup>The alien who resides with you shall be to you *as the 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” (19:33-34).

Far before Jesus, the scriptures were already challenging people to widen their borders beyond self, beyond kin, beyond neighborhood, to see that anyone in your presence is deserving of as much value, as much dignity, as much justice, as much love as you are. These are the two commandments the lawyer quoted back to Jesus: love God; love neighbor. And so I am not surprised that this same parable came up just last Friday night as I joined many church members, many neighbors, many friends, to witness at the Lights for Liberty Vigil to make a witness for fair and humane treatment of people-- especially children-- held in detention centers crossing the border. Today, we expect new ICE raids as part of an aggressive anti-immigration campaign in this country, and they are certain to disrupt homes and families and lives. Remember, unless your ancestors were the indigenous people who walked this land, we were *all* once strangers in a strange land.

But I can understand the lawyer still pushing Jesus on the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. After all, I even struggle with some of the neighbors I do have, like the people who say hateful things on the Leonia Talks listserv. And growing up in the South, I'm used to saying hello and chit-chatting with the people I pass on the street, even if I am too busy or don't want to. So, it still feels abrupt to me when I say hello to neighbors and they just pass on by without saying anything. I know my friendliness might come across as weird and even intrusive to them, but their aloofness is just as strange to me. If we cannot be loving and kind to our neighbors, then what value is this commandment?

And many people think we should start with our immediate neighborhood or tribe before we even think of people on the outside. In a post to our town's listserv last week, someone criticized the focus on the humanitarian crisis at the border, saying that we have homeless people and veterans in need here and we should help them first. I absolutely think we should help the homeless and veterans, and support systems that care for the weak and vulnerable among us. But we must not wait until all local problems are solved before we start to care for other people outside our provincial borders-- that is just an excuse for inaction; for there will always be need among us, even in our own homes.

Jesus follows through with an example of what neighborliness looks like, and what neighborliness requires, and it does not keep us in our own borders of neighborhood or of comfort.. He gives the Good Samaritan as our model-- the outsider who, unlike the priest, or the Levite-- both people one would expect to uphold moral righteousness-- stops to help someone who has been robbed, beaten, and left for dead. The Samaritan doesn't just stop and order this man an Uber ride home. He bathes the man's wounds

with oil and wine. He bandages them. He carries the man onto his animal, and brings him into town and settles him with an innkeeper, making sure to cover every single expense.

That kind of neighborliness sounds foreign even to this friendly Southern girl. I will even say this lesson is hard for me, because I know I am just not there yet. Last month I ran The Spartan Race-- it was a 4 mile obstacle course race, and I had been training rigorously with some friends at the gym to prepare for it for three months. Now, most of the folks at my gym are 10-20 years younger than me. Some of them have not yet launched into career or family life, and so they spend much more time at the gym than I do, and if there are days they don't go to the gym, they run-- and send pictures to our group from their smartphones mapping their route, time and distance. They probably think that at my age I just don't know how to map a run and send it in a message, but the truth is, I just don't run in my limited free time. On our strength training days, I watch them do pull-up after pull-up, while I struggle to simply hang from the bar for 60 seconds. So, when we were planning for the race, someone said something to me about starting together as a team, and finishing together as a team. "No way." I told them. "Don't let me be the ball and chain to your hard work. It will just be too stressful to me to know you are all waiting on me.."

The next day, it must have been one of those days when I couldn't make it to the gym but everyone else did, because the day after that, our trainer said, "We all talked about it together, and we all decided that we want to stay together, which means that we stick with you and you stick with us." Again, I insisted that they go on ahead of me, and that I wouldn't enjoy the race if I felt the pressure from holding them back. As it turned out, Chris decided at the last minute to race with me (and asked me, wait: we are paying money to crawl under barbed wire, scale walls, and haul 70 lb. sandbags through the woods? So basically we are pretending to be refugees and calling it fun? Now THAT's some privilege!). Since she had not trained, it seemed to me I would finally get my way, and the true athletes would race ahead of me while Chris and I struggled along.

So, it was a bit of a surprise when early on, Chris and I passed Eddie and Mark from my team at one of the early obstacles. I just figured it was crowded and that when the racers spread out, Eddie and Mark would pass us again. But to tell you the truth, I did not think much about them, until Chris and I crossed the finish line. "Where are Eddie and Mark?" I asked my teammates, as we examined our medals and basked in the glory of being finishers. They told me that Eddie and Mark were still on the race, because at the Dunk Wall-- where we had to paddle through a ditch filled with water and swim under a wall to the other side-- Eddie had lost his glasses. They paddled and

dunked in that ditch like ducks diving for fish, looking for Eddie's lost glasses. They found 3 pairs!-- but none were Eddie's. Eddie cannot see without his glasses. He tried to send Mark, who was one of our best athletes, ahead to finish the race. But Mark said, "No way. No Spartan finishes alone." And so, as the hours crept by, Mark was Eddie's eyes, guiding him through the woods, over rocks, up and down hills, and over, under, across and through 18 more obstacles. It was late, but they finally finished safely. Mark showed no bit of resentment, just happiness to finish with his friend. The truth is, I did not even stick around to wait the extra hours it took for them to finish; we had long headed home. And if I really admit it, I *had realized* that we had passed Mark and Eddie, but I *did not even care* to pay attention to whether they caught up. I was excited; this was *my* race; I had been working for it, and I wanted to perform my best. As it turns out, Mark-- a young, Indian man raised in a Hindu family-- outperformed me, even though his finish time was hours after mine, he won the medal in neighborliness. I suspect Mark could teach me a few things about being a better Christian.

I know I'm not there yet, but like the lawyer who questioned Jesus, I *want* to be there. Luckily, this odyssey we call Christian living may have its obstacles, but no one is timing us, and it is not just about reaching the final destination.

The reason we should love God and love our neighbor, the alien, and the stranger is always the same: "I am the Lord your God." the Torah says. Love others because God. Not "because God said so," but because God loves them. And God loves us. And, there is enough love to go around. This love must have implications for how we treat our neighbors, whether they are people on our block who do not speak the same language as us or practice the same faith as us, or people on our border who are simply trying to hold on to their children and survive. If we have trouble thinking about specifics, the bible gives us tons of good examples to follow, including Psalm 82 in our readings today: "Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. <sup>4</sup>Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked" (Psalm 82:3-4).

The lawyer had asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. In Greek, the word is *aiōnion*-- live into the eons. He wanted to make sure he had the best score so that he would get the medal of eternal life at the end of a race. But Jesus' reply does not mention eternal life. What Jesus tells the lawyer, "Do this, and you will live"-- in Greek, *ZeSe*-- Do this and *you shall be living*. We live to love God and love neighbor not so

that we win a prize at the end of the race. The prize is now, and it is the chance to live fully, as a blessing to God and a blessing to others. Do this, and you will live. Amen.