

MEASURING LIFE
Sermon, July 18, 2010
Text: Luke 10:25-37
Vacation Bible School Sunday

Today's parable is perhaps the most familiar of all Jesus' parables, and is arguably one of the most well-known short stories in all of literature. We are told an expert in the law stood to test Jesus. "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Now, many have traditionally understood this question to be, "What do I have to do to get to heaven when I die?" But not everyone thinks so.

The ancient Greek term translated "eternal" has other nuances to it that don't necessarily apply to time, such as fullness, substance (substantive), richness, abundance ... these are *qualitative* as opposed to *quantitative* nuances. Think of a moment or a time that was just so full, so rich, that you never wanted to end ... that could be the nuance of this man's use of the term "eternal." Adding weight to this interpretation is that the word translated "life" is not the ancient Greek word "bios" (βίος), which means physical life, but the Greek term is "zoe" (ζωή) which, again, implies more of a *quality* of life. I know this is beginning to sound like a tedious grammar lesson, but bear with me a little bit here; I think this is an important key to this whole passage. In English, we talk about living, as in breathing and we talk about living, as in living it up. The latter implies a vigorous fullness, fulfillment, enjoyment ... a zestful life, a life that is full to the hilt. Well, where we use the same word "live" to mean two relatively different things, the ancient Greeks used two different words ... again, "bios" is the living, heart-beating, biological life, and "zoe" is the living-it-up, zestful, full-to-the hilt, quality-kind of life. Somebody can be "bios" alive, but "zoe" dead; in the current vernacular, that's someone who needs to "get a life."

Again, "zoe" is used here in this passage when this expert in the law stood before Jesus and asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" I think he's asking the same question many of us are asking: "Jesus, what do I have to do to get or acquire a good and full life? What is it that I have to do to get my life right?" I think many of us are here before Jesus this morning for the same reason this man is before Jesus in this text. We are here because we want to get our lives right, and we find no matter how hard we try to get our lives right, no matter how devoutly we try to do the right thing, we can't seem to get it or do it good enough. So we've come to ask Jesus, "What is it that I have to do to get a good and rich and full life? What is it that I have to do to get my life right? What shall I do that I can be content, happy, fulfilled now and forever?"

Jesus' response is to say, "Well, you're a lawyer. What is written in the Law? How do you read it? How do you understand it?" The man thinks for a moment and then responds, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself." "Right!" Jesus says. "Do this, and you will live!" This is a good answer, and Jesus affirms it! He's not giving a sardonic reply to a testy lawyer; He's giving an enthusiastic reply of affirmation to a man who gave a good answer. If you can bear with me for another quickie Greek grammar lesson: Something lost in the translation is the Greek tense of *present continuous action*, which is at play here. Jesus reply, "Do this and you will live!" could be paraphrased, "Keep on doing this, and as you do so, you will come alive! Your life will be full, abundant, rich and delightful as you keep on loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, etc." By the way, seen in this light, Jesus' reply reiterates and underscores that the lawyer's question really isn't an esoteric question about life after death, about pie in the sky when we die by and by. His question is an earnest and practical and immediate question about how to *have* life and *live* life here and now, and his seriousness is reflected in his follow up question.

The text continues, "But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' " "He wanted to justify himself." This has often been (mis)understood as the response of a self-righteous man trying to justify himself in the eyes of others; however, that could be reading our cultural influences and smug biases into the text, which is a constant danger in translation. In its simplest terms, to "justify" means to *get* or *put* something right, to get something "lined up" right, like you would justify the margin on a Word document. When you justify a document, you are trying to get everything lined up and neat and "right" as it can be. "He wanted to justify himself" could be a positive statement, meaning that this man really wanted to get his life lined up right; he really wants to know how to straighten his life out. And he keeps pressing Jesus for answers to help him do so, which is commendable! Try reading this as, "Trying to get his life right, the expert on the law asked, 'And who is my neighbor?' " It is in response to that question Jesus begins to tell the story of the Good Samaritan. That means the point of this familiar parable is not to tell us that if we love God we must also love the neighbor. The lawyer already knew that. In fact, he was the one who told Jesus that! It's not even the point of this familiar parable to judge those

of us who have walked past those in need. There are other passages in the Bible that judge us for that. The main point of the parable is to address the man's question, "Who is my neighbor?"

You know the story. A man left Jerusalem, walking toward Jericho. Along the way he fell into the hand of robbers who beat him, robbed him and left him half dead. The first person to walk by was a priest, who saw him, passed by on the other side, and kept going. The next person to come by was a Levite, who also saw him, also passed by and kept walking. Now, both of these men were religious professionals. We don't know why they walked by this man who was clearly in need; I have read pages and pages of studies and research and speculation on this over the years. For example, some scholars think they didn't want to come near the victim because the man appeared dead, and to touch a corpse would have defiled them according to ceremonial law, rendering them unfit for duty for weeks so they wouldn't be able to serve or do their professional duties. Maybe that's it, I don't know. We really don't know why they walked by ... maybe they were just being jerks. We don't know and it's as if Jesus is telling us, "Don't look for the moral of the story there. Keep going." Next comes a Samaritan. When he sees this victim in dire need of mercy, at considerable cost and inconvenience to himself, he takes care of him. Then Jesus looks at the lawyer and asks, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" *Notice the critical twist, here.* The lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor?" has been changed, as Jesus now asks, "Who was a neighbor to this man?" Like all good teachers, Jesus is constantly trying to get us to ask the right questions. Do you want to learn how to get a good and rich and full life? Do you want to get your life right? Well, begin by asking the right questions! "To whom *shall I be* a neighbor?" The key is not found in figuring out who your "real" neighbor is, it is about *being* a real neighbor yourself! As someone well put it, "If you want to make a difference, you have to *be* different." *You learn and practice what it means to be a good neighbor yourself.*

For more guidance on this, I would like to turn this morning to another expert on neighborliness, a Presbyterian minister who for over three decades invited anyone who would tune in, "Won't you be my neighbor?" as he would pull off his sport jacket, don a cardigan sweater, sit on a bench, remove his shoes, and replace them with canvas tennis shoes. The late Fred Rogers, host of the PBS children's show, "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood." He was a Presbyterian minister; the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) ordained Fred Rogers to a specialized ministry, as "an evangelist to work with children and families through the mass media." In a March 6, 2000 interview (*three years before his passing*) published in *Christianity Today*, Fred Rogers talked about studying systematic theology in seminary under a Dr. William S. Orr. He said, "From then on I took every course Dr. Orr offered; it could have been underwater basket weaving. He was a great influence on many of our lives. [And] not just because he was brilliant. He was the kind of person who would go out on a winter's day for lunch and come back without his overcoat. I studied Greek with him and then I studied New Testament with him. [After he retired and eventually went into a nursing home,] every Sunday, my wife and I would go to the nursing home to visit him. One Sunday we had just sung 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God' and I said, 'Dr. Orr, we just sang this hymn and I've got to ask you about part of it. You know where it says, 'The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him. For, lo, his doom is sure. ... one little word will fell him' ? Dr. Orr, what is that one [little word] that would wipe out evil?' [Without missing a beat, Dr. Orr] replied, 'Evil simply disintegrates in the presence of *forgiveness*. When you look with accusing eyes at your neighbor, that is what evil would want, because the more the Accuser (*which is the word Satan in Hebrew*) can spread the accusing spirit, the greater evil spreads. On the other hand,' Dr. Orr said, 'if you can look with the eyes of the Advocate [the Comforter, the Holy Spirit], on your neighbor, those are the eyes of Jesus.' "

To ask the question as Jesus reframed it, "To whom shall I be a neighbor?" The short answer is, "Anyone who God brings across your path who is in need of mercy." To be a neighbor is to look with the eyes of grace and mercy upon all whom God brings your way. Now, that's a lot of people! In fact, that's just about *everyone* God brings your way. The great 17th century theologian Jeremy Taylor used to counsel aspiring ministers to "Speak kindly to everyone you meet, for *everyone* has a problem." Everyone has been or is being beat up by some "robbers" in life; all of us have our battles. The great 20th century theologian ... Ann Landers ... once wrote, "Be kind to people. The world needs kindness so much. You never know what sort of battles other people are fighting. Often just a soft word or a warm compliment can be immensely supportive. You can do a great deal of good by just being considerate, by extending a little friendship, going out of your way to do just one nice thing, or saying one good word." You come across people every day who are being beat up figuratively and literally by the robbers and vicissitudes of this life. *Be a neighbor*, a neighbor who displays mercy and offers a graceful hand or word of help.

You want to get your life right? Do you want a life that is so full you just don't want it to ever end? Then love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as love yourself. And keep on doing so, and you will come alive! And in doing so, you become the very hands and feet and voice of Jesus Christ reaching out in love and compassion for all people in need of mercy.

Be a neighbor ... if for no other reason than there once was a time Jesus stopped and showed mercy to you.