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Sermon  
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I have a certain amount of affection for the young lawyer in this morning's parable. Our translation cites him as wishing to 'test' Jesus, setting him up as an adversary of sorts to the reader. We like to think of anyone questioning Jesus as an antagonist, but in all fairness, I think it's something that each of us does every time we listen to scripture, and take time to pray it into our own lives.

He asks Jesus, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?', which means, 'How am I to be truly faithful? How am I to ensure that I am living a good life? What must I do to follow God?' It's a great question. It's one we ask again and again throughout our own lives, so if that is testing God, then count me in as an offender.

Our late Bishop Tom Shaw used to say that most people asked him questions not out of curiosity, but rather the questions they already felt they knew the answer to—but they wanted to see what the bishop said, so that they could compare their answers with his. So, what Bishop Tom, who himself was a monk, would do was to respond to each questioner with another question: "What do you think?" This is what Jesus does here. The lawyer recites the Shema as his answer, the grounding orientation of Israel to God—Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.

That should be enough. But as with every law, we strive to understand how exactly to apply it—how to link theory with practice—"but who is my neighbor?", the lawyer persists. Jesus could have asked him, as Bishop Tom might have: and who do YOU think your neighbor is? But he doesn't this second time. Instead, he tells a story.

Now the parable of the Good Samaritan is as ubiquitous as flan. People know this story inside and outside of Christianity. Experiments have been made on people, using this story as the basis. Funny enough, this story Jesus used to expand on the law is now a law itself—protection from litigation when you are assisting with good intent. Jesus tells the story of those who pass by an injured man on the side of the road, and the one who comes to his aid is the most unexpected of them all—a Samaritan, a longstanding enemy of the Jews, rivals for economic and religious authority, differing in ethnicity, language, culture and homeland. When Jesus asks the lawyer who was the neighbor, the lawyer responds—‘the one who showed mercy.’ ‘Go and do likewise,’ Jesus responds.

I have a certain amount of generosity for this lawyer, because it was possible he asked his question to test Jesus, but it’s equally possible that he wanted a line drawn in the sand for him and others—to know exactly the point of goodness, fidelity and mercy that one should show and still be called faithful. That is a very human trait—we would like a sense of certainty as to how to behave in order to get the, for lack of a better term, prize. We’d like to know the exact ingredients, the right order and the perfect temperature for our lives to have merit, to be faithful to God, and for most of us even if we don’t want to say it our loud, to give just enough to get onto the good side of the afterlife without giving too much away (and even better if those things don’t get in the way of our good lives right now on this side of the veil).

The lawyer knew the law. But wanted another definitive from Jesus to further define just how loving he had to be and of which neighbor, to keep in the good zone. Let me be clear—this is not just the lawyer. We do this too, all the time. We justify, absolve and deem blessed different people based on our own sense of their goodness, their proximity to us and our own lives, our own narratives. We use a particular frame of reference when it comes to defining neighbor—one which usually suits our own needs.

Jesus doesn’t respond again with a question, and he doesn’t respond with a definition. He responds with a story. A story about the intersection of two people who come from deep suspicion and distrust of one another. The neighbor, the one whom we are called to love as ourselves, he says, is the one who shows mercy. Not kindness. Not justice. Mercy.

In a chaotic world such as the one in which we live, we cling to a hope that there are clear lines of good and bad, right and wrong, in and out. Those definitions are comforting to some because they feel clean and distinguishable. Nuance is not comforting when things are uncertain; gray areas push us further into that uncertainty. Jesus' words in this famous, possibly foundational parable of Christian theology, goes right to the heart of the story rather than sitting in the law as they understood it. The lawyer wants a rule to be written down. Jesus gives him a story about real, incarnate, messy people instead.

The core of Christianity is not a set of rules, of dos and don'ts. It is centered in the commandment to listen to the story of the one for whom it is hard for you to hear from, and learn about the virtue of mercy.

We talk about mercy lightly, here in our American, bootstraps, individual, merit-based, Christocentric culture. We speak more comfortably of kindness, or goodness as the virtues we admire-- that the love shown through those are gifts given from us to another by our own choice. But mercy, mercy is for those who have done wrong, more often; who have erred. Mercy allows for vulnerability, reminding us that our baser self more often wishes for revenge or eye for an eye justice and the satisfaction it brings.

We don't particularly care to offer mercy to others. But that is if we place ourselves in the role of the Good Samaritan in this story. Plenty of people think that their role is the one who is the helper, the one who saves the day of the man injured on the road. We often play the hero in our own stories. But what if we are not the Good Samaritan, in this story, but the injured man? The one who is wounded, and lost and watching people walking by, unwilling to stop, to look him in the eye, to acknowledge his humanity on the side of the road. Mercy looks different when you are the one lying on the side of the road.

In a few minutes we will offer the Confession, which we do every Sunday other than the Easter season. We begin, no matter which version we use, with 'Merciful God.' We ask for mercy from our God, whose literal defining characteristic is the virtue which we fallible humans struggle

with again and again. We have all erred. We have all fallen short. We all have stories which are nuanced and led us down paths we could not have imagined for ourselves. In our confession, we lift these stories up to God, asking for mercy. And the God of mercy—the one about whom we sing of the wideness of God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea—is the Samaritan, who sees us and loves us even if it means that God must yoke Godself to fallen humanity in the process, to heal us and make us whole.

Mercy makes us whole, as God is whole.

And there is no shortage of ways we can, in this lifetime, in this city, in this country, in this moment, to preach that word of mercy in response to the stories we hear day in and day out. When we begin to calculate our own worth, our own goodness, to ask of Jesus the line between good and bad so that we can see where we fall on it, we’ve lost sight of God’s eternal word of grace and redemptive love. When we find ourselves grasping on to the letter of the law of the faith, rather than flinging our very selves on the grace and mercy of our savior Jesus Christ, we become the one who ‘tests’ Jesus instead of follows him.

It’s not easy, this mercy. Even the lawyer can’t bring himself to say that the ‘Samaritan’ was the one who showed mercy—he conveniently leaves him unnamed. But for a community to find this story as their touchstone, their moral compass? It means that our surprising neighbors must take precedence over our own sense of power. That the human story holds weight and dignity as befits those who are made in God’s image.

I pray this in the name of our God, the Great Good Samaritan, Amen.