

Amos 7:7-17

Psalm 82

Colossians 1:1-14

Luke 10:25-37

OPENING:

In our Gospel reading, Jesus uses the familiar sequence of three to tell this famous story. Here it's the "Levite, the priest, and the Samaritan passing by the wounded man" instead of "an Irishman, an Englishman and Scotsman walk into a bar..."

Here's another story that uses that three-fold pattern to get us started this morning:

There was once a Baptist, a Roman Catholic and an Episcopalian standing at the pearly gates of heaven.

Jesus was there to greet them and asked the three this question:

"WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?"

The Baptist answered first: "The Bible says that you are _____."

But before he could finish, Jesus interrupted him: "Stop right there, I asked who do YOU say that I am."

So the Roman Catholic stepped up and tried to answer the question: "The Church says that you are _____."

But again Jesus interrupted him: "I asked who do YOU say that I am."

Finally the Episcopalian was left. Jesus asked "Who do YOU say that I am?"

The Episcopalian cleared his throat and said: "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

Jesus took a step back, he was amazed, mainline Protestant, the 'frozen Chosen', all that and here he gave the right answer.

As Jesus was thinking that, suddenly, the Episcopalian chimed back in and interjected: "But on the other hand..."

CAMP HOPE:

The lawyerly manner with which the Episcopalian answered the question in that story reminds me of the poor lawyer in our Gospel reading. This religious expert is trying to get the right answer, trying to understand Jesus' teachings, but tying himself in knots in the process.

This week, I was reminded of this interaction while at Camp Hope with our youth. One afternoon we were driving home from our worksite all crammed in a rented pick-up truck.

To pass the time while in these vehicles, one of our youth had brought a book with questions numbered from 1 to 3000. They would ask people in the car to pick a number—say “37” and then you'd turn to the page 37 where there would be a question like: “What is your favorite color and why?” These were all very fun.

Somehow, at some point, I got asked the following question: “#450: What is the greatest of the seven deadly sins?”

I tried to answer immediately, hoping to sound authoritative. I said: “Historically, the greatest Sin is Pride, that's what Lucifer was guilty of, trying to be like God. That's what caused his Fall from heaven and grace. *Pride cometh before the Fall*, says the Bible.”¹

Steve Sides was driving the pickup and he, as a good former Catholic Altar boy well-versed in the Catechism, backed me up and agreed.

One youth did not buy it though, and she said “Oh come on, tell us what *you* really believe, don't depend on something else. Tell us what *you* think.”

That knocked me back and I wondered how I was going to get out of this one with my integrity intact, hoping that someone would ask another question from that book of 3000 questions.

Luckily, another youth did say “well maybe he believes that the Bible is true, and that's why he said it.”

That indeed provided me enough cover to get out of the situation, and we all moved on.

¹ Proverbs 16.18

CENTER:

I share that story and the three-fold joke at the start because, although the story of the Good Samaritan is certainly about our ethical demands about who our neighbor is and it's certainly about what we as a church can do to help out the least of those around us, the passage, as a whole, also forces us to take a step back.

It asks how we understand the Gospel, how we recognize Truth in our faith and in the world, what we rest upon as authoritative, and how we *then* can make a decision for right action.²

1st QUESTION:

This dynamic is most evident in the sequence by which Jesus answers the lawyer's questions.

Jesus first relies on Scripture, citations from the Torah, from Leviticus and Deuteronomy. This is Scripture that is so familiar, because Jews recited it every day, that certainly the lawyer (like any good lawyer) knew the answer before he asked it.

The answer is: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your strength, with all your soul and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." But I think Jesus points to those words with a bit of a wink and a smile, as if to say: "that's all you got to do, what Moses brought down from Sinai way back when, what God's people have been saying for centuries," It's that easy and it's that hard.

Jesus is recognizing the inherent difficulty of the Law with the same intrigue that he would tell the young ruler to sell all his possessions, in the same way that Jesus said it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.³

That is, he's trying to say it's impossible. The lawyer asks "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The answer is that we simply can't do it, by ourselves. He's trying to say that you are asking the wrong type of question, because inheritances are not earned, achieved or earned, they are given by the grace of God.

But, the lawyer needs more and is not satisfied with the tried and true Scriptural answer. Maybe like my inquisitor at Camp Hope car-ride, the lawyer wants more than dusty doctrine.

² See the Collect for this Week.

³ Luke 18.25

2nd QUESTION:

Unlike me, Jesus is ready for this and is capable of delivering the message in a different package—one that is deeper, fuller, and that fits the context then, and now. We must be cautious, however, with the story of the Good Samaritan because it has become such an embedded part of our culture, both secular and sacred, it's hard to approach it afresh with new eyes. Through the centuries, it's a long been an attempt of scholars to say who is who in a story. We are so quick to insert ourselves into the story, who stands in for the Levite, the priest, the Samaritan, the innkeeper. In other words, like the lawyer, we think that this story is about us, about how we can somehow pass the test, how we can work harder and better and stronger and faster. The lawyer is asking the equivalent of “how many times must I go to CrossFit? How many noble causes do I need to reference on social media? How much virtue signaling must I do in this world so that I can make the cut?”⁴

We think we have to pass the test, keep trying to convince ourselves that we would be the Samaritan rather than the Levite or the priest. The good news is that Jesus already passed it for us.

So, in the words of one scholar, “What is to be imitated in the Samaritan's action is not his moral uprightness in doing good deeds but his spiritual insight into the truly bizarre working of the mystery of redemption.”⁵

CONCLUSION:

So, although we need our beloved three legged stool, scripture, tradition and reason, to help us out along the way, we will be just as stymied as our lawyer if we don't think that God is providing our salvation, rather than us earning it. Like the lawyer, we are often asking the wrong questions, or trying to answer them in the wrong way. Through *his* teaching, Jesus is upending our expectations, shattering the barriers of what we think is true or capable, rearranging the careful roles that we have established.

The lawyer tried to ask a question about eternal life, he got one about how to live in this world.

The lawyer tried to ask who a neighbor was, he got an answer about how it's not about defining those out there, but changing the nature of who you are.

That's how Jesus teaches, that's how God acts in our lives.

⁴ Mockingbird Podcast, *Same Old Song*, Episode Pentecost 4C (July 1, 2019)

⁵ Robert Farror Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, and Judgement*, 217.