

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 10, 2016

The scholar of the law in today's Gospel, and for brevity's sake, we'll call him a lawyer, asks a perfectly reasonable question: 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' It's a question I'm sure we all want the answer to.

But knowing that he was dealing with an expert in the law, Jesus turns the question back on the man and asks what is written in the law, which is, after all, his area of specialization.

The lawyer recites the answer perfectly. 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart...and love your neighbor as yourself.'

And perhaps not being able to help himself, the lawyer starts to nitpick. He uses the techniques of cross-examination. He *wants* Jesus to define the word neighbor.

The lawyer would, of course, have been very familiar with the Book of Leviticus which had determined that the word neighbor meant 'sons of your own people' or in other words the people of Israel; although it makes a concession that also includes foreigners who have adopted Judaism. So, according to the law, the word neighbor was essentially understood to mean fellow Jews, not Gentiles and certainly not members of a breakaway heretical sect like the Samaritans.

The lawyer expects a scholarly response and is getting ready for a full-blown debate with Jesus about the fine points of the law. He does this presumably because he thinks he has a chance of bettering his opponent. The poor man obviously has not idea who he's up against!

So, instead of an argument he gets a parable, and one that blows him and all his prejudices right out of the water. And it should blow us out of the water too because we might wonder ourselves which character we identify with in the story.

As always, paying close attention to the text is always rewarding. The lawyer asks the question: 'Who is my neighbor?' But Jesus at the end of the parable asks him a different question: 'Who proved himself to be a neighbor?'

As always, Jesus gets to the heart of the matter. We shouldn't be going round asking ourselves 'Who is my neighbor?' but rather looking at ourselves and asking 'To whom am I a good neighbor?'

The lawyer is looking to the object of love and trying to identify which groups he could classify as neighbors; whereas Jesus is looking at the subject of love and wants to know which of the travelers acted as a true neighbor.

The lawyer asked the wrong question. Jesus asks the right question; and it's the question we should always be asking ourselves. Everyday we should be asking ourselves whether we have been treating those around us with dignity and justice and mercy.

As always, Jesus was always charting new territory, and he didn't water down his challenges to suit his listeners. He made it clear that those who claimed to love and believe in God would have to prove that love by also loving their neighbor. This love would identify *anyone* in need of compassion and care as a neighbor.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "Neighborliness is not a quality in other people; it is simply their claim on ourselves. We have literally no time to sit and ask ourselves whether so-and-so is our neighbor or not. We must get into action and obey; we must behave like a neighbor to him"

We'd all like to be the Good Samaritan; but we all know how often when faced with a similar situation in real life we have actually walked right past on the other side of the road.

This parable humbles us like no other. It provides us with a ready-made Examination of Conscience. And it does so because it describes such a real situation and it lies bare our deep ingrained selfishness and indifference. We discover how we are extremely inventive in coming up with excuses for inaction.

Barbara Brown Taylor is an Episcopal minister, and she once wrote about a time when she was preparing a sermon on the same Gospel we heard today. As she drove to work she came upon a car with its hood up along the road. As she got closer, a tall man stepped into the road, holding up a pair of jumper cables, looking her straight in the eye.

A hundred thoughts raced through her mind in about three seconds: the man needs help ... you are a single woman alone in a car ... the man needs help ... never open your door to a stranger ... go to the nearest service station and send a mechanic ... the man needs help ... what if he cannot afford a mechanic ... the man needs help ... I'm sorry, I cannot help ... maybe the next person will. And then she drove off to work to complete her sermon on the Good Samaritan.

Her story reveals the frustration many of us feel about the gap that exists between knowing what should be done and doing it, and she suggests that after all the arguments are made and all the issues are debated, it comes down to a very simple formula: Love God, Love neighbor, be a neighbor. If we want the world to be different, to be better, then we need to be willing to do a little, or do a lot, but at least do something.

The Good Samaritan is a powerful and challenging parable. And Jesus laid the challenge down to each of us in the last verse when he said we are to 'Go and do likewise.'