Sunday, July 12, 1998
NEW DIMENSIONS
Luke 10:25-37

Lawyers frequently get a bum rap in our society. There are more bad jokes about lawyers than any other profession. Why that is, I have no idea. What I appreciate about the lawyers I know is their ability to ask good questions.

One day, a lawyer asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responded with a question, “What is written in the law?” The lawyer answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus told the lawyer that he had given the correct answer.

Then, as a good lawyer often does, he asked a follow-up question, “Who is my neighbor?” And Jesus answered by telling a story. We know it as the “parable of the Good Samaritan.” The parable not only gives a new definition of neighbor but also a broadened definition of love and a new dimension in our understanding of eternal life.

A man was traveling down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He was robbed and beaten by thieves along the way, and they left him in the ditch to die. Later, a priest who was traveling along the same road saw the dying man but did nothing to help. A Levite, another highly respected religious leader, came by, and he also did nothing to aid the injured man.

But then a Samaritan who was traveling along the road saw the man. He stopped, gave first aid, placed the man on his donkey, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day, he gave money to the innkeeper for the man’s continued care and said that he would stop by some days later. If the money he had left was not enough for the injured man’s care, he would pay more.

“Which of these three,” asked Jesus, “was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The lawyer answered, “The one who showed mercy.” Jesus then said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

We have called this man the “Good Samaritan” for so long that we forget that when Jesus mentioned a Samaritan stopping to help, the lawyer and the others who were present were surprised and shocked. The Samaritans were one of the most hated minority groups of that time. They were not considered to be God’s people.

Here’s why. Hundreds of years before, they had been brothers and sisters with the Jewish people. They were the northern ten tribes of the original twelve tribes of Israel, who, seven hundred years before the birth of Christ, had been conquered by the Assyrians. They had intermarried with their conquerors and got off track religiously, as far as the Jews in the southern two tribes were concerned. They no longer recognized Jerusalem as the holy city.

So, when Jesus said it was a Samaritan who stopped to help, his audience was not only surprised but shocked. They thought of Samaritans as being outside the realm of God’s love. Nothing a Samaritan did could be called good.

From this parable, as I said earlier, we get a new definition of love, a new definition of neighbor, and a new understanding of what it means to experience the realm of God and who is included in it.

First, let's look at this new dimension of love. Usually, when we think of the word "love," we understand it in intimate personal terms. We know the good feelings of having a person love us and of being in love with someone. To be sure, this is one aspect of love. It is often personal and intimate. Love among friends and family members is also personal.

But there's more to love as Jesus lived and described it. You can be expressing the love of God and neighbor without being in a personal relationship with someone. The New Testament repeatedly describes "love of God and neighbor" as a willingness to serve others in their particular situation — a readiness to help solve problems that afflict other people as individuals or as a group. Justice is a form of love.

The Samaritan did what needed to be done. He gave first aid and then took the injured man to the next town, saw that he was taken care of, and then went on his way. He probably never came to know the man's name or anything else about him. We can assume the injured person was a Jew, but that didn't deter the Samaritan from helping him.

In fact, love of God and neighbor, as Jesus taught and lived it, can be carried out from a distance without ever coming into contact with the person you are loving.

For example, there is as much love being practiced when a person uses his or her skills to work at providing jobs for the unemployed as there is in bringing baskets of food to a family who is hungry because the father or mother is unemployed. Working to provide jobs may not bring you into some kind of direct personal relationship with the people who are hungry — you might never see them, but it is still the practice of love of God and neighbor.

Another example: this congregation has a good record of letting this building be used by outside groups for all kinds of positive purposes. This is an expression of love of God and neighbor, even though most of us will never come into personal contact with many of those this building serves.

The dimensions of the love of God and neighbor are too limited if we think of them only in terms of one person doing something directly for another. We can be loving in many ways — for example, working for better street lighting so that all people are safer at night in our city. The hospital worker whose job it is to antiseptically clean the rooms to prevent the spread of infection is practicing Christian love as much as the physician or nurse who comes into direct contact with the patient. Both are necessary.

Let's suppose that the Samaritan traveled this road between Jerusalem and Jericho several times a week, and each time he found someone who had been robbed and beaten. It would also be an expression of love of God and neighbor if he worked to see that this road was patrolled regularly by police officers so that this kind of crime was reduced.

Note also that loving God and neighbor does not ask whether or not the person or persons in need deserve help. The Samaritan did not first question the man in the ditch to determine whether or not he was deserving of his time and energy. God's love is freely given to all who will accept it. So it is to be with our love of neighbor.

Not only does this story expand our dimension of love, but it also does the same with our concept of neighbor. Remember, that was the follow-up question from the lawyer, “Who is my neighbor?”

I’m sure that each person hearing this sermon would want to be of help to his or her neighbor when necessary. Our difficulty, like that of the lawyer, is determining who is our neighbor. Most of the time, we think of our neighbor as being someone who lives in our part of town, on our block, next door, or across the street. In Lincoln, as in many other cities, we have “neighborhood associations” that have boundaries. And that’s one definition of the word. But when we talk of love of God and neighbor, it carries with it another dimension.

In this story, Jesus defines neighbor as anyone who is in need. It is not defined by where a person lives, what the person’s ethnic origin is, social class, religious beliefs, whether we know the person, like the person, or agree with the person’s point of view.

Rather, Jesus, in this story, turns the lawyer’s question around — if we are to practice love of neighbor, then the proper question is not “Who is my neighbor?” but “To whom am I called to be a neighbor?” Who is in need of neighbor love?

There’s one more point to this story. In addition to illustrating a new definition of love and a new concept of neighbor, the story broadens the dimension of what it means to inherit eternal life. Remember, that was the lawyer’s first and basic question. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” By telling the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus was teaching him that the question he was really asking was: “What must I do to experience the love and the power of God in my life here and now and forever?” And isn’t that our question also?

Here’s how the story answers that deeper question. The story begins: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.” This is more than a figure of speech. Jerusalem is 2300 feet above sea level. Jericho is 1300 feet below sea level, down near the Dead Sea in the area known as the wilderness. To go from Jerusalem to Jericho, especially in those days, was to travel between two different worlds — from civilization to wilderness and desolation.

The reputation of this road was one of danger. When those people heard a man was traveling on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, they knew he was in trouble from the very first line of Jesus’ story.

The message, even today, is obvious. On the journey of life, there’s really not that great a distance between civilization and wilderness, between order and chaos. Even today, we spend our lives negotiating the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, between safety and danger, and we discover sometimes how close together they can be. The wildfires in Florida these past weeks are only one example.

Reginald Denney is a truck driver. One day, a few years ago, he was driving down a city street in Los Angeles, minding his own business, making deliveries, traveling a street in the “City of Angels.” He turned a corner and, in an instant, was in the middle of a riot. He was pulled from his truck, beaten, and nearly killed, and his whole life changed. Reginald Denney discovered how close together Jerusalem and Jericho can be because that’s the road he was on. He thought it was a city street in Los Angeles. It can happen to anyone at any time.

She thought they had the perfect marriage. Everything was going so well. Then one day she returned home from work and found a note on the kitchen table. Her husband was leaving her

for another woman. In an instant, she went from one whom other people kind of envied to one for whom other people kind of had sympathy. She discovered how close wilderness is to civilization.

Sometimes, on this journey of life, we are the beaten man at the side of the road. And sometimes we are like the priest and the Levite. They weren't evil people. They were terribly busy and in a hurry. They were important people and had appointments to keep in Jerusalem. Besides, it's a dangerous road. We don't want to risk our lives carelessly. Someone else will come.

Hopefully, sometimes we'll also be the Samaritan who stops to help. That's what we're called to do. Life's road is dangerous. What choice do people of faith really have but to stop and help one another? This is the nature of the realm of God, that we love our neighbor as ourselves and that we understand our neighbor is whoever needs a helping hand.

We spend a lifetime on this road, and from time to time, we come across someone who is hurt, and we need to stop and help. When we stop and help, it is then that we experience the power, presence, and love of God. And this is part of what it means to inherit eternal life because that eternal life begins here and now.

Let me state it in personal terms. When I love my neighbor with this new dimension of love and new understanding of who my neighbor is — then I am touching that which is already eternal. Then I am participating in and expanding the love of God. I believe that life here is but a limited and finite image of full life, which is limitless and infinite. I taste and prepare for eternity by living fully, loving wastefully, and daring to be all that each of us has the capacity to be. Amen.