Sunday, July 11, 2004
NEW DEFINITIONS
Luke 10:25-37

I went to the store last week to buy a new swimsuit. The "Sales Associate," formerly known as a "Sales Clerk," informed me that the store no longer sold "swimsuits," the new term is "swimwear." I like this new term because the word "suit" has always meant to me a coat with matching trousers. Then I discovered that stores no longer sell shoes and stockings; they sell "footwear," and "sleepwear" is the new definition and name for pajamas. You can also purchase "leisurewear."

New definitions and new words for existing activities and objects are always emerging. When I was younger, garages were used to store cars. Now you have a garage, and some people fill it with miscellaneous items and park the car in front of the door or on the street.

You've no doubt noticed the new construction on the north side of our church building. Many of you have asked what's being built. Our Early Childhood Education Program, which was formerly called the First-Plymouth Preschool, is building a new "Outdoor Classroom" to replace the old playground.

I appreciate new definitions like these, which more accurately describe what's happening and give new understandings to everyday words and actions. That's what Jesus did. In his ministry, he offered new definitions, new metaphors, and new ways of thinking about God and the ways God's Spirit is at work in you and me.

The story today from Luke's gospel is a good example. A lawyer asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It was his way of inquiring, "What must I do to find and fulfill God's purpose for me in my life?" Jesus answered with a question to the lawyer, "What is written in the law?" The lawyer replied, "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 your neighbor as yourself." Jesus said, "You have given the right answer; do this and you will live."

But the lawyer, wanting to justify himself, asked a follow-up question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered by telling a story. You know it as the parable of the Good Samaritan. With this parable, Jesus gave a new definition of neighbor and a new definition of love.

A man was traveling down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. He was robbed and beaten by thieves along the way, and they left him in a 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 person, 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, bandaged his wounds, put him on his own animal, took him to an inn, and took care of him during the night. The next day, he gave money to the innkeeper for his continued care. He told the innkeeper he would stop by on his return trip, and if the money he provided for the man's care was not enough, he would make up the difference.

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

Some of you have heard this story so many times, you could have forgotten how shocking it was. The idea that a Samaritan would stop to help the injured Jew in the ditch was heretical and unbelievable. Samaritans and Jews refused to have anything to do with each other. Each considered the other to be outside of God's people.

Here's why. Hundreds of years before, Samaritans and Jews were all of Hebrew origin and were considered to be the offspring of Abraham and Sarah. These people who were now known as Samaritans had comprised the northern ten tribes of Israel. About seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, they had been conquered by the Assyrians. They had intermarried with their conquerors and had gotten off track religiously as far as the Hebrews in the southern two tribes of Israel were concerned. Among the doctrinal issues in dispute, in addition to the problem of intermarriage, was the fact that the Samaritans no longer recognized Jerusalem as the "Holy City."

So, when Jesus said it was a Samaritan who stopped to help, the lawyer and the others who heard the story were not only surprised but also shocked. They thought of Samaritans as being outside the realm of God's acceptance. Nothing a Samaritan did could be called good.

From this story, as I mentioned earlier, you get a new definition of love and a new definition of neighbor.

First, consider this new definition of love. Usually, when you think of the word "love," especially when it is applied to a relationship between individuals, you understand it in intimate personal terms. You know the good feelings of having a person love you and of being in love with someone. Indeed, this is one aspect of love. It is often personal and intimate. This form of love can be romantic and erotic. The Greek word for this kind of love is "eros." Love among friends and family members is also personal and powerful. The Greek word for this type of love is "philia." The city of Philadelphia is known historically as the city of "brotherly love."

But there's much more to love as Jesus lived and described it. You can be expressing the love of God to another person without being in a personal relationship with that individual. The Bible repeatedly describes love of God and neighbor as a willingness to serve others in their particular situation. It is to practice mercy and compassion. This form of love is a readiness to solve problems that afflict other people as individuals or as a group. To work for justice is a form of love. The Greek word for this type of love is "agape."

The Samaritan in the story did what needed to be done. He gave first aid and then took the injured man to the next town, saw that he was properly cared for, and then went on his way. He didn't first stop to ask, "Is this man worthy of my help?" or "Is he a Jew?" He probably never came to know the man's full name or anything else about him. He didn't establish a close personal relationship with him.

The love of God and neighbor, as Jesus defined it, can and often is carried out from a distance without ever coming into contact with the person or persons who are the recipients of your love.

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 families who are hungry because family members cannot find employment. You may not have some kind of direct personal relationship with the people who are hungry — you might never meet 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 the love of God and neighbor, even though most of you will never come into personal contact with many of those this building serves.

According to the definition of the love of God and neighbor as Jesus defined it, your definition of love is too limited if you think of it only in terms of one person doing something directly for another. You can carry out the love of God and neighbor in many ways — for example, working for better street lighting so that 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.

Suppose the Samaritan in this story traveled this road between Jerusalem and Jericho several times each week, and each time he found someone who had been robbed or beaten. It would also be within this new definition of love of God and neighbor if he worked to see that this road was patrolled regularly, to prevent others from being attacked.

Note also that according to this more encompassing definition of loving God and neighbor, you do 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 your love of God and neighbor.

Not only does this story give a new and expanded definition of love, but it also gives a new and expanded definition of neighbor. Remember that was the lawyer's original question.

I'm sure that each person hearing this sermon would want to be of help to your neighbor when necessary. The difficulty, like that of the lawyer, is determining who is your neighbor. Most of the time you probably think of your neighbor as being someone who lives in your part of town, on your block, next door, across the street, or in your general area. In Lincoln, as in many other cities, there are "neighborhood associations" which have defined boundaries. That's one valid definition of the word. But when Jesus talked of the love of God and neighbor, he also had in mind a new definition. Your neighbor is anyone in need. It is not defined by where a person lives, their ethnic origin, social class, religious affiliation, political persuasion, or whether or not you like the individual.

Jesus turns the lawyer's question around — if you are to practice love of neighbor, then the proper question is not, "Who is my neighbor?" but "To whom are you called to be a neighbor?" Who is in need of "neighbor love?"

There's one more new definition in this story. Jesus gave a new definition of what it means to inherit eternal life. Remember that was the lawyer's original question.

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?"

Here's how the story answers that deeper question. It begins: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho." Jesus chose that trip on purpose. It's a revealing metaphor —

Jerusalem to Jericho. Jerusalem is 2,300 feet above sea level, whereas Jericho is down near the Dead Sea, which is below sea level 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 danger. When Jesus said a man was traveling on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, they knew he could be in trouble from the very first line of the story.

On the journey of life, there's really not that great a distance between civilization and wilderness, between order and chaos. You are always living your life while negotiating the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, between safety and danger, and you discover how close together they can be. Your teenage daughter leaves home to drive to college, which is 400 miles away. She's a good, careful driver. Yet you know there is danger on the road. An accident can happen so quickly.

A woman thought she had the perfect marriage. Everything was going well. Then one day she returned home from work and found a note on the kitchen table. Her husband was divorcing her for another woman. In an instant, she went from someone whom other people kind of envied to someone for whom others had sympathy. She discovered how close wilderness is to civilization.

Sometimes in your journey of life, you are the beaten individual on the side of the road. Other times, you are like the priest and the Levite. They weren't evil people. They were terribly busy and in a hurry. They didn't want to take the risk of defiling themselves by touching an injured person who might be dead. They did not want to risk their lives carelessly.

Hopefully, sometimes you will be the Samaritan who stops to help. That's what it means to love your neighbor, even though it can be dangerous. What choice do people of faith have but to stop and help one another? It is when you do this that you experience the power, presence, and love of God. And this is part of what it means to inherit eternal life because eternal life begins here and now.

When you love your neighbor with a new definition of love and a new definition of neighbor, then you are touching that which is already eternal. Then you are participating in and expanding the love of God. This kind of living and loving is but a limited and finite image of a fuller life, which is limitless, infinite, and eternal. You participate and prepare for eternity by living fully, loving lavishly, and daring to be all that you have the capacity to be. Amen.