

✠ Luke 10:25-37 ✠

IN NOMINE IESU

The most damning thing about us is our attempts to justify ourselves. Hear again the words of St. Paul, written to the church in Colossae. “We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of [God’s] will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:9-10).

St. Paul heard of the faith and good works of the church in Colossae, and so wrote to them to encourage them, letting them know that he was praying for their continued faithfulness. It is telling that St. Paul did not assume that they would be wise, but thought it necessary to pray for them and to tell them that he was praying for them so as to encourage them and bolster their faithful resolve. The point is, we don’t know if the congregation at Colossae continued steadfast or not, we only know that St. Paul prayed for them. Yet we do not hear St. Paul’s words in this light. Rather, we hear them as kudos for a job well done.

Here’s how we hear these words as we want them to apply to us: “We *are* filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, and if we’re in doubt about that, we should pretend we have such wisdom and understanding because we don’t want to appear inferior to anyone in matters of faith. We *do* walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, so long as no one takes a really good look at our thoughts and lives, because then our cover will be blown. We *are* fully pleasing to God, believing in Christ, because we’re really good Christians. We *do* bear fruit in all our works, which are all good because I’m a good person. And I *do* increase in the knowledge of God, or at least I say to others that I increase in the knowledge of God so as to appear dutifully humble. I actually have it all figured out and am pretty much an expert in all things divine.” Such is our attempt to justify ourselves, to cast our behavior and speech in a positive light even when they are so often shrouded in darkness.

This is exactly how the lawyer who desired to test Jesus thought. You are called a teacher and rabbi, but I will question you and find out whether or not you know what I know. For I am experienced and knowledgeable. I know the truth with or without you, dear Jesus, and I know the only way to inherit eternal life, to live in the presence of God, is to fulfill the Law: to love God fully and to love my neighbor as myself.

Now before we condemn this scribe outright for trying to earn salvation through works of the Law, pause all you good Lutherans, and take a look at Jesus’ answer. “You are right, do this and you will live.” That is, fulfill the Law and you will live. Those are Jesus’ words. So go now, dear Christian, fulfill the Law. Do what the Law requires, for thus says the Lord, “You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them” (Leviticus 18:5).

And isn’t that what you want to hear? Don’t you want to hear that your works count for something? Don’t you want to hear that your opinions and beliefs, your practices and piety matters for something? You’ve put your time in; you’ve paid your dues. Don’t you want to

hear that you've been at this Christian thing for a long time, and so deserve something for your loyalty and fidelity?

That is what the scribe, the lawyer, wanted to hear. In fact, the scribe thought he'd already accomplished commandment number one: to love God out of the fullness of his heart and with all his mind and strength. He did not ask Jesus, "How do I know if I love God?" No, he assumed he loved God and wanted to know, so as to justify himself, who his neighbor was.

He thought Jesus' answer would sound something like this: "Your neighbors are those who do good to you and care for you." Isn't that also what we expect? We expect everyone to be neighborly to us. And when anyone crosses us, we consider him or her an enemy instead of our neighbor. When someone crosses us, justifiably or not, we attack them and beat them with our words and thoughts, leaving them half dead on the road to Jericho. It can be rightly assumed that the scribe loved those who loved him, as our Lord says, even the tax-collectors and pagans love those who love them.

Wanting to justify himself, that is, wanting to make it look like he obeyed and fulfilled the Law to the letter by loving those who loved him, the lawyer asked, "Who is my neighbor? Who is it that I must love as myself? For no one is as good as me. No one knows the Law like I do. No one cares more for this church than I do. No one puts in as much time looking after matters of the church than I do. No one considers things as well as I do. Who is like me that deserves my love?"

Well, who are you that you deserve God's love? Do you confess that you have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed? Do you confess that you have not loved your neighbor as yourself? Do you confess that you have lived as if God did not matter and that you mattered most? "Oh, yes, I confess that. See, look here at the order of service, I say those words." Or is it merely vain repetition, meaning nothing but an outward show of piety and tradition? It's not the words that make the confession, but the contrite and penitential heart that God looks upon that makes the confession.

I've seen many a Christian kiss the holy crucifix, but I've yet to see one place their lips upon the Ten Commandments. The reason is simple: you don't kiss the noose that is about to be tightened about your neck. You don't embrace the executioner before he lops off your head. The Law kills, it condemns. Or, more properly, sin, which is made manifest by the Law, puts you to death. The Law condemns because it is good, right, and holy.

The scribe knew this. The scribe knew that the Law is good, and so wanted to be one who upheld and honored the Law, he wanted to be good and right. Yet, he was not seeking the truth in so far as he thought he knew the truth. If he sought the truth his question would not have been a question, but a plea: "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me." But the lawyer wanted to be justified by the works of the Law because no one thinks that they're the band of robbers on the road to Jericho.

Yet no one is justified by the works of the Law. That is, no one is declared sinless because they keep the Law, for all have sinned, that is, all have transgressed the Law of God. And it is not as if we sometimes keep the Law, or mostly keep the Law, and sometimes we don't, like a sort of spiritual Dr. Jeckle and Mr. Hyde. Rather it is like we are Mr. Hyde who in the end, killed Dr. Jeckle. As it is written, "Who can discern his sins" (Psalm 19:12) and also it is written, "No one is righteous, no not one" (Psalm 14:1-3; 53:1-3). And our Lord says, "Out of the heart of

man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (Mark 7:21-23).

But we want this parable to be about us, because we, like the scribe, want to justify ourselves by the works of the Law. We want a measuring stick to see how far we’ve progressed in our morality and good works. We want people to say, “What a great fellow he is,” or “what a great gal she is.” We want to be able to look at all the good we’ve done and say, “See, look here, I’m a good person, I deserve good things like heaven and health, friends and posterity.” We want this parable to be about the Christian because then, despite all the evidence to the contrary, we can say, “I’m a Christian, so I’m a Good Samaritan.” No wonder the world thinks the Christian is a hypocrite. We tell everyone else to confess that they are sinners and in need of God’s mercy, but when we look in the mirror, we peer through rose-colored stain glass windows.

But in this light, everyone knows and likes the story of the Good Samaritan. It even made it’s way onto *Seinfeld* as a major plot point. Everyone except the totally depraved wants to be considered the Good Samaritan. Thus even non-Christians want to believe that this parable is about them; that it teaches us to treat others like we want to be treated. Everyone wants to believe that this parable shows us how to show mercy and be neighborly. Everyone wants this parable to demonstrate good morals and respect for everyone we meet. Everyone wants to be called a Good Samaritan.

But be wise in Christ and foolish in the world. If the world interprets a part of Scripture in one way, then the spiritually discerning follower of Christ should immediately be wary of that interpretation and seek Christ alone. You see, Jesus’ words are true: “Fulfill the Law and you will live.” That does not mean that we can fulfill the Law, just that if we could we would live. Thus it is written, “The person that does the commandments shall live by them” (Romans 10:5). But it is not the children of Adam that fulfill the Law, but the Son of God.

Jesus fulfilled the Law perfectly, loving God by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross (Philippians 2:8), and loving everyone as His neighbor, showing mercy to all by dying for all. Thus, Jesus was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father. Jesus is righteous, knowing and obeying the Law perfectly, and so He is rewarded for His righteousness by being raised from the dead and given authority over all things in heaven and on earth. Not because He is divine, but because He is obedient, as it is written, “Although He was a son, He learned obedience through what He suffered” (Hebrews 5:8).

You see, this parable, like so much of Holy Writ, does not place us in the place of honor, but in the place of helplessness. We are not the Good Samaritan, but rather we are the man left for dead. For we have been beaten and left for dead by sin and the devil. He has robbed us of our original righteousness and left us as good as dead. We are dirty and we stink. We’re naked and shamed. And what is more is that we cannot cry out and we cannot care for our wounds; we cannot save ourselves from imminent death.

And neither can we save others by the works of the Law. The priest and the Levite can do nothing, not because they have no compassion, but because they only know the Law and the Law requires one to remain undefiled. Thus they cannot show mercy because the Law shows no mercy. They are the religions of morality, which say, “Just pray more, just have more faith, just be good.” They give nothing but the Law and so they are incapable of showing mercy and

they will save no one.

The Good Samaritan, however, though He knows the Law, knows also that God is love and that He is merciful. The Good Samaritan is Jesus. He is the Perfect Samaritan. He comes and has mercy on those who know no mercy and cannot show mercy to others. He pays what He does not owe and restores what He did not take. He cares for those who would be the priest and Levite by showing them true godliness, doing for them what they cannot do. He cares for those who are the robbers by undoing what they have done. He cares for the innkeeper by giving more than enough and promising more on top of that. He cares for the beaten man by pouring oil and wine on his wounds and taking him to safety.

I do not know why you think you came here this morning. It could be said that my reason is the worst: I'm paid to be here. I don't know if you came to catch up with friends. I don't know if you came because your soul is hurting and yearning for forgiveness and peace. I don't know if you think you came to see if the pastor would mess up or say or do something stupid. I don't know if you think you came for no reason at all. I don't know why you think you came here, and I don't care.

Because I know that the Good Samaritan has bound up your wounds. He has wrapped your naked and beaten body in His shroud of righteousness. He has poured the oil of holy Baptism over you, cleansing you of your dirty blood that blinds your eyes. He has washed you clean with the wine of His blood, giving it to you to drink to strengthen and sustain you. He has deposited you in His inn, the Church, to care for you and to make sure that you are healed of your sins and that your iniquity is removed from you.

The Lord Jesus Christ loves you. You are here because He has brought you here even though you yourself were not headed here. He has made sure that you are cared for and loved so that when He returns to make good on His promise, you will be ready to travel with Him to His Father's house. Jesus shows you mercy in bringing you here to where His holy food feeds you and strengthens your weak soul; where His words encourage you and mend your broken heart. He has delivered you from the dominion of darkness and transferred you to His kingdom. He is the Good Samaritan who says to you, "I have fulfilled the Law for you, I've given my life for you and I give to you my life. Fear not, your sins no longer condemn you, your iniquity has been removed, for I am the merciful one."

In the name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT.

✠ AMEN ✠