



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York

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[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Sunday, July 14, 2013**  
*The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Choral Eucharist  
at 11am*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Joel C. Daniels  
on  
Luke 10:25-37  
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*BETWEEN JERUSALEM AND JERICO*

In our reading from the Gospel of Luke today we get to overhear a kind of discussion that Christians don't often get to hear: a rabbinic-style argument over the interpretation of the Torah. A lawyer asks, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He knows, of course: to inherit eternal life you must follow the law, which can be summarized as loving God, and loving your neighbor. But the lawyer presses Jesus more: "But who is my neighbor?"

In reply we get a story that you may have heard before—the story of the Good Samaritan—the Samaritan who stops to take care of a wounded traveler who had fallen prey to robbers on his way down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Lying there alone, "half-dead," a priest had seen him, but the priest passed him by. And then a Levite saw him, but he passes the traveler by. Then the Samaritan happens along, and he stops. He binds up the man's wounds, cleans them, and then takes him to the closest inn, where he puts down a deposit with the innkeeper, entrusts the wounded man to the innkeeper's care, and promises to return. Jesus asks: Which of the three passers-by proved himself neighbor to the man? Even lawyers know the answer to that: The one who showed the traveler mercy by giving of his time, his care, and his financial resources. Jesus says, Go and do likewise.

Perhaps embedded in the story is a kind of anti-priest and anti-Levite sentiment: typical hypocritical clergy turning up their noses at those less well-off than themselves; saying one thing, doing another; you can't trust them. Maybe. But maybe not. Unlike the Samaritan, the priest, at least, had certain sacred religious responsibilities, responsibilities that he couldn't have carried out if he'd come into close proximity with a dead body, which it very well may have appeared the wounded traveler was. The care of the dead was a solemn obligation for everyone—everyone, that is, except for the priests, because of their specific role, their part in the division of labor.

If that's the case, then we shouldn't vilify the priest and the Levite, but instead see their specific inclusion in the story as setting up the kind of classic conundrum that rabbis come up with all the time: asking each other, in a situation like that, which law takes precedence? The law of ceremonial obligation? Or the law of love of neighbor? Should the priest and Levite have risked their ability to carry out their responsibility to the community, in order to have the potential opportunity to be a neighbor? After all, the road between Jerusalem and Jericho was well-traveled, so presumably someone would come along shortly that would be able to help.

Which law takes precedence? A sincere question. And in this famous story, we see Jesus asserting the ultimate priority of being a neighbor to those in need, and therefore the supremacy of the principle of charity: “the greatest of these is love.” When religious laws conflict, as they frequently do (rabbinic commentaries are full of examples), it’s the law of love that should prevail. We see this illustrated not neither by the priest, and nor by the Levite, but by the Samaritan. Go and do likewise; go and do as the Samaritan did.

This would’ve been shocking for the listeners to hear. The Samaritans were despised by the Jews, and vice versa. For the Jews, the Samaritans worshiped in the wrong place and even obeyed the wrong laws. In this case, however, apparently the Samaritan obeyed the right law better than the priest and Levite did.

But you’ll note that in Jesus’ question at the end, and in the lawyer’s reply, the Samaritan isn’t actually specified. Who proved himself neighbor? The one who showed mercy. Yes. But you could make the case that it wasn’t only the Samaritan who did so. Someone else in the story shows the precedence of the law of love as well, equally surprisingly, and that’s the innkeeper. Imagine: he was brought a wounded man, bleeding and perhaps still unconscious, who occupied one of his few rooms, and then the one who had brought him left again, leaving the innkeeper burdened with the care of a half-dead man. It’s true that the Samaritan had left “two pence” as a deposit toward any additional expenses, but how could the innkeeper be sure that the Samaritan would return? How did he know that he’d actually be paid back—especially if the innkeeper was a Jew, who didn’t trust Samaritans anyway? And besides, he’s an innkeeper, not a nurse, and so taking care of beaten-up people isn’t his job.

Like the Samaritan, however, the innkeeper also extends himself beyond what the audience would have expected, both in providing for the traveler and in trusting the Samaritan. So you can see, in the interaction of the two of them as they care for the wounded man, a sort of alternative economy that they set up, an unexpected form of personal relationship, a way of living that is against the social norms. Mercy for the traveler; trust of one another; the priority of the law of love. This, instead of understandable indifference, instead of ensuring the maximization of their own profits, instead of the mutual suspicion natural in circumstances such as those. The innkeeper responds to the Samaritan’s charity with his own charity, and so they show what it is to be a neighbor, to be a community of neighbors, quite against expectations.

It’s against expectations for a number of reasons, including the fact that innkeepers in ancient days weren’t necessarily the upstanding citizens that they are today, to the point that sometimes the term “innkeeper” meant someone who ran an establishment in which morally dubious activities occurred. So the contradiction implied by the term “Good Samaritan”—since Samaritans weren’t “good” for the first century Jewish audience—may be just as dramatic as the contradiction implied in describing “the Good Innkeeper.” “Good Samaritan” and “Good Innkeeper,” but no “Good Priest” or “Good Levite”! In these contradictions, the crowd is being asked to imagine a world where the right people interpret the law the wrong way, and the wrong people interpret the law in the right way. In other words, they’re being asked to imagine a world turned upside down.

In fact, Jesus is talking about a world turned upside down, because he is turning the world upside down, in a way that his listeners may not have grasped yet. That’s because, in this story of the Good Samaritan, we’re also hearing a description of the salvific ministry of Christ himself. Luke says that the lawyer engaged with Jesus because he wanted to “justify” himself. An understandable desire: he wanted to be faithful.

Part of the message of the Gospel taken as a whole, however, is that we can’t justify ourselves; we can’t save ourselves, not in any ultimate sense. One of the messages of today’s epistle, even, is that it’s only in Christ, by the grace of God, that we receive redemption. The lawyer wanted to justify

himself, and in response Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, but we might say that it is actually the story of Jesus Christ. A story about him, and a story about us.

Because all of them and all of us—the lawyer, the crowd, and you and I—like the traveler, we're walking on a perilous road, and on the way we've been left half-dead by our own sins. These sins can't be removed by either Levites or priests, nor can we do it ourselves. We could end up lying there for days, we could lie there forever; we could even die there, by the side of the road, left alone.

But into this dangerous world came the only one who can save, the only one who can justify. The Word became flesh and dwelt here, halfway between Jerusalem and Jericho; the Word became a traveler on that ancient road, like us. Jesus, the healer; Jesus, the outcast Samaritan. Finding us there, in mortal need, like the Samaritan he gives abundantly of his own substance, giving everything he has, not counting the cost. He binds every wound; cleans them with wine and oil (the wine of salvation, the oil of baptism) and, by doing so, he lays claim to us, takes on the responsibility for our safety. We are under his care; we are, truly, saved.

Then he leaves. But when he does, he entrusts us to the loving care of the innkeeper, the promised Holy Spirit, who shares in his ministry of redemption. Therefore we can rejoice that that Spirit will remain with us, and look after us, until that day when the Good Samaritan comes again to bring us, safely, home.