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BECOMING MR. ROGERS
Luke 10:25-37

For a while I thought the house next door to us, address 3473, was cursed. When we first moved to our house two people were living at 3473, an older couple who were not married. Their names were Herb and Shirley. One day I was talking to a friend about them and I mentioned Herb's name. My friend who had recently been at our house said, "That's not his name. He introduced himself as Bill to me." I thought that was rather odd, but later Laurie was outside and saw Shirley working in her yard. Laurie said, "Hello, Shirley." No response. Laurie tried again, still no response. She tried a third time, and that time the woman turned around and said rather coldly, "My name is Louise."

I wondered if they were spies, or maybe in a witness protection program hiding from the mafia or something. It wasn't long before Herb Bill and Shirley Louise split up and sold the house. A young married couple moved into 3473. We were happy. For a while. It wasn't long before we began to have concerns about them too. Eventually we were to find out that the husband had his issues, and among them was anger. At one point he grabbed a kid from the neighborhood and threw him up against the car just because the kid's ball had rolled under his car and the kid was trying to get it. Then there was the day that Laurie almost got in a fight with him because he kicked our dog. They moved out and some young single people moved into the house. We were kind of relieved, but not for long. These new people liked to party. A lot. One Saturday night the party was very loudly going until midnight. We went and politely asked if they could back it down several notches. They were apologetic and nicely agreed. There was no change. We called the police. They showed up around 1. Things came to a stop. The police left and they cranked it up again. Apparently someone else called the police and they showed up again and kicked everyone out except for the residents.

Aren't people interesting? By that I mean can't they be a pain in more than one part of your anatomy? Sometimes I wonder what is wrong with the human race. Many are nice, but some really try your patience. What are we to do about it? Jesus had something to say about it in Luke 10:25-37. As we continue our study of his parables in Luke we'll learn some important lessons from what he had to say. Today we will think about perhaps the most familiar of all of Jesus' parables. We call it the Parable of the Good Samaritan. It has become an indelible part of our culture. We have hospitals named after it, Presidents have used the Good

Samaritan in their addresses and the television comedy *Seinfeld* had an episode in which the Good Samaritan played a role. What can we learn from this little story?

THE MAN ASKED THE RIGHT QUESTION

Verse 25 introduces a person who starts a conversation with Jesus and calls this individual an “expert in the law.” Some translations call him a lawyer. We’ve all heard the jokes about lawyers. “What’s the difference between lawyers and a herd of buffalo?” “Lawyers charge more.” “How does a photographer get a group of lawyers to smile?” He just says, “Say fees.” Sandra Day O’Connor, supreme court justice, said, “There is no shortage of lawyers in Washington D. C. In fact, there may be more lawyers than people.”

We know lawyers are not all bad. Mike Chagaris is a lawyer and he is a wonderful man. However, that’s really beside the point since the person in this story isn’t the kind of lawyer we have today. He was a theologian. He was an expert in the ancient Law of Moses. Oh, so do we have some theologian jokes? I found some, but the only people who would understand them are in seminaries.

This theologian asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” There are a couple of things to note about this question. First, he wasn’t asking because he hoped to learn the answer. Verse 25 says he “stood up to test Jesus.” When a teacher gives you a test, what is the purpose of it? Does the math teacher need to know if he gets on a train in Cleveland at 3 P.M. heading west at 50 miles per hour and his friend gets on a train in Chicago 350 miles to the west at 5 P. M. heading east at 60 miles per hour what time they will pass each other? Does this question gnaw at him and keep him up at night? Or is he planning a trip and must have that information to coordinate it properly? Do the people that write the SAT find themselves all tied up in knots because they so badly need to know that medicine is to illness as law is to anarchy? No, they already know that. The math teacher doesn’t need to know that he and his friend will pass each other at 7:16 P. M. at a point 136.5 miles east of Chicago. He already knows. He only asks because he wants to see if you have learned anything.

This expert in the law thinks he knows the answer to his question. He is testing Jesus to see what he knows. He is looking to catch Jesus in a mistake so he can declare that Jesus doesn’t know what he’s talking about and thus should not be followed.

A second note is that the way the legal expert phrases his question reveals a theological bias when he asks, “What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?” What do

you *do* to inherit something? Nothing! Someone else dies and stipulates in a will that you are to be given something. You haven't earned it. It is simply granted to you. Our theologian's question reveals a theological position that I will talk about shortly, but it is a crucial dividing point.

Though the question was merely a test it is still the most important question for every human being. If we don't have an answer to that question we are missing on the biggest issue we will ever face. This man understood that life will extend beyond this plane and that the continued existence could be either wonderful in God's kingdom or the worst thing that could ever happen to a person.

Obviously this is not a universally accepted idea. But assume just for the moment that there is life after death. That life, if we understand the biblical sense of eternal life, is a life of joy, abundance, security and peace. To miss on that, to experience God's judgment, is to be separated from all that and have the opposite. It is an unending existence of sorrow, lack, fear and guilt with no hope of change.

This is a question with eternal significance. I don't fret much when I am asked what menu item I would like to order at a restaurant. The need to make a decision make create a little stress for me at times, but it is a decision with short lived consequences. It will impact only for the duration of the meal. Buying a car is a much bigger deal because way more is at stake and it will have consequences for years. Choosing a person to marry is a huge deal because it is for "as long as we both shall live." But the question this theologian was raising is *forever*! It is, therefore, a question of immeasurable significance.

Stand at the grave of someone you love more than life itself and consider the possibilities. If you do not know that you and your loved one will inherit eternal life, the *best* you can hope for is that this person you loved is gone forever and you will have no more contact with him or her. The worst is too awful to contemplate.

I can guarantee you from personal experience when you come to that place life takes on a rare clarity. You see it as it truly is. I've been there. I've been at the grave of my own child. In those moments you understand this is by far the most urgent, most important question in life. How talented you are, how much recognition and approval you get, how much money you make, how successful you are, how your investments are doing, how good your body is, what someone else might think of you, none of that will even register on your importance meter compared to the question of whether you and your loved one will inherit eternal

life. This question takes precedence over everything else. You had better have an answer for it or you will never really be ready to live even now.

What could convince us that there is such a life? Ultimately the proof would be we would need to see it. Someone would need to die and live again, never to age and die again. The Bible claims that Jesus did that. So now the evidence is out there. Eternal life is real. But how do we gain it? The answer to this question is urgent, more than anything else in life. So what is the answer?

This theologian was trying to catch Jesus in a theological error. I suspect he hoped Jesus would say that you could earn eternal life by doing something other than keeping God's Law. After all, Jesus seemed to be guaranteeing common fishermen who weren't real good at the Law and notorious sinners who completely failed at it that they would inherit eternal life. He had said things like being meek or being poor was what gained it for you. That's not what the Law of Moses, God's revealed Law, seemed to say. So the theologian is ready to skewer Jesus when he comes up with one of his weak sauce answers. Jesus knew exactly what the guy was up to. So he simply turns the tables on him and asks him what he thinks. He's an expert in the Law, so what does he believe it says about gaining eternal life?

The fellow replies that we must love God with everything we have and love our neighbors as we do ourselves. That's how you do earn eternal life. He could have quoted Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:8, but he didn't need to. The pinnacle of the Law is the Ten Commandments. Those commands break down into two categories. The first has to do with relating to God. Have no gods before him, worship no idols, and so on. In other words, nothing comes before God. He is first in everything. Love him with all your heart. The second group of commands has to do with people. Don't steal, don't lie, don't covet, don't commit murder, and so on. They can be summed up love your neighbor as yourself. If you love your neighbor you won't steal from him, murder him or lie to him. Unless your neighbor is a woman who asks, "Does this new dress make me look fat?"

Jesus affirms the guy's answer. "You have answered correctly." Then he lets the theologian have it right between the eyes. "Do this and you will live." He said, "You know the answer, so, to quote the Nike company, just do it. Then you'll have eternal life."

THE MAN HAD THE WRONG IDEA

We have to pay careful attention to subtext at this point. As you know subtext is something which is not stated explicitly in a piece of literature but is implicit in

what the characters say or how they act. The subtext here tells us that what Jesus said had put the theologian seriously on the defensive. We know this because in verse 29 Luke tells us he wanted to justify himself. This whole passage hinges on that statement. This is all about a man justifying himself.

Jesus knew, the theologian knew, and everyone else knew, that whatever he claimed about how he loved God he absolutely did not love his neighbor the way he loved himself. Religious leaders of the day like him had considerable disdain for many of their neighbors. They pretty much looked down on the common people, and neighbors like tax collectors and prostitutes they treated like dirt. They occasionally had to deal with Gentiles because the Romans were in town and running the show. Jewish leaders like this guy viewed them as dogs. Perhaps a closer analogy in our day was they viewed them as vultures. They certainly didn't love them.

Think for a moment about that command to love your neighbor as yourself. How do you love yourself? I start my day preoccupied with what *I* must do or want to do today. That agenda may get interrupted, but I view interruptions as just that: obstacles interfering with what *I* want to do. I pay attention to how I am feeling and am quite solicitous of myself. I make sure I get enough to eat. I protect myself at all times and defend myself when criticized by others. I am concerned with how I look and with what others think of me. I do all I can to make sure my needs are met. Am I a self-absorbed narcissist? Do I have a big "I" problem that others are appalled by? No, you are just like me. We are all like that. So the question is, do we treat anyone else in this world like that? In other words, do we love anyone else the way we love ourselves? The answer obviously is no.

That guy didn't even love his own family like that, and he knew very well that he for sure didn't love many of the people around him that way because in truth he despised them. What a brilliant response by Jesus. His answer to the theologian is irrefutable. It was the theologian's own answer, yet Jesus has put the spotlight on the fact that he didn't live by his own answer, therefore was not worthy of earning his way into the kingdom of God. This guy has blundered into his own trap. This is why the man, now blustering and desperately seeking a way out of the trap, looks for some way to justify himself. He wants to prove both that he knows more than Jesus and that he is, in fact, worthy of inheriting eternal life.

That simple little statement that Jesus' parable is prompted by the desire on this man's part to justify himself is, in fact, the real meaning of this most familiar of all the parables. The story, apart from its context, has a powerful message. But in its

context it has an even more important message. It is one that is not finished in this passage, but it is a crucial one that we all must come to grips with, beginning with the theologian.

The theologian, trying to defend himself and prove that he did too deserve eternal life, picks up on the second part of his answer. Seeking to excuse his obvious shortcomings in regard to loving others the expert in the Law asks, “who is my neighbor?” Right there you see the major problem with religion. Religion is based on the question, “what do I have to do to earn eternal life?” What do I have to do to gain God’s acceptance and love? How do I justify myself before God? Religion always comes at God from that perspective. The problem is that God’s answer is unattainable for us. We don’t love our neighbors as ourselves and we never will. So what can we do? Religion typically does exactly what this guy did. It does what lawyers do. It looks for loopholes.

I have mentioned that I recently had a colonoscopy. Last year my insurance company told me that I would have to pay for it because I hadn’t met my deductible, which is bad news because that is one ridiculously expensive test. I delayed the test and that was fortunate because Obamacare came to my rescue. Among the provisions of the Affordable Care Act is a stipulation that health insurance companies must pay for cancer screening, including colonoscopies. Yahoo. The folks in D. C. had saved me. Sort of. Provisions like that provoked a 40% hike in my premiums, meaning the cost of that test would be way less than the increase in premiums. Here’s where it really gets fun. Our insurance company has lawyers who look for loopholes. They determined that act covers cancer *screening*. In my test they found a polyp and removed it. That, the lawyer says, means it is no longer a screening, it is now a diagnostic and treatment procedure, therefore not covered. So I get to have higher premiums *and* pay for the expensive test. Thank you, oh great leaders in Washington. Lawyers look for loopholes.

The ancient rabbis spent a great deal of time looking for loopholes in God’s Law. They did so because like us, they couldn’t obey its real intent. If you read Matthew 5:21-48 from the Sermon on the Mount you will see Jesus attacking a series of ways the rabbis looked for loopholes in God’s Law. They found ways to divorce their wives, insisting that God *commanded it*, ways to void promises they had made in contracts so they didn’t have to keep promises, and reasons why they should despise certain people instead of loving them.

What this theologian is doing is saying, “Well, yeah, maybe I don’t love Roman dogs and their lackeys like Levi, but they aren’t really my neighbors. I mean, who is really my *neighbor* after all?” So Jesus tells a little story to answer that question.

A guy is traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. Even today that road is a winding somewhat difficult road through rugged terrain. Back in that day it was notorious for being the rural equivalent of a bad neighborhood. Walk through it alone and you were begging to get mugged. And that’s what happened to this poor fool. He should have known better than to attempt it alone.

The traveler is beaten and stripped of everything he has, left semi-conscious at best, bleeding and naked. Ah, but not to worry. A priest happens upon him. Surely he will help him. But no, instead he steers clear of him, walking over to the other side of the road and hurrying on by. Then a Levite comes along. Levites assisted the priests in the temple, they were sort of the religious JV team. To everyone’s dismay, he did exactly what the priest did. He ignores the victim and goes right on by without stopping.

Now why would these religious leaders do that? There have been several theories put forward, but Jesus doesn’t say. He had no interest in excusing them. His point is that there is no excuse for what they did. He is highlighting the fact that in their minds they kept God’s law but in fact they weren’t loving their neighbor.

Then along comes a Samaritan. Ah, a Samaritan. Jesus’ listeners at this point were on the edge of their seats. They knew this would be good. What would the Samaritan do? Spit on the victim? Or, since he was merely half dead (or mostly dead according to Miracle Max in *The Princess Bride*), maybe the Samaritan would finish him off just out of spite and we would all agree that the Samaritan was despicable and most certainly not to be loved.

History, sadly, is full of the irrational hatred of humans for each other. It has been Catholic against Protestant, Sunni against Shiite, Turk against Armenian, French against German, white against black, Hutu against Tutsi. It still goes on today all over the world. In that day in that part of the world it was Jew against Samaritan. The Jews and Samaritans despised each other. In the previous chapter, Luke 9:51-56 Jesus wasn’t allowed to enter a Samaritan village because he was Jewish. The Samaritans were a remnant of northern Israelites who had racially intermixed with other groups, so there was an ethnic component to the feud. Then they had their own schismatic religion that had split off Judaism, so there was a religious

component to their hatred. Earlier some Jews had gone up and leveled a temple of the Samaritans. Around the time of Jesus some Samaritans had snuck into the temple in Jerusalem at midnight of the Passover and scattered the bones of dead people there, thus defiling the whole temple. A few years after this a man heading to a feast in Jerusalem was killed by Samaritans and in response a mob of Jews went to the town where it happened and massacred all of the residents. These people despised each other as deeply as any ethnic groups ever have.

What does this hated Samaritan do? He doesn't ask whether the victim is Samaritan or Jewish. He doesn't ask if he's good or bad. He simply sees a human being in desperate need of help. The Samaritan renders first aid then puts the victim on his own donkey and takes him to an inn. He pays the innkeeper to give him a bed and food and whatever medical help he needs. He said to the hotel manager, "whatever this guy needs, put it on my card." Let's remember that this Samaritan has never met this guy and doesn't know him at all.

Jesus turned everything upside down. Just having a stinking Samaritan in his story was bad enough. Maybe it would have been slightly palatable had the Samaritan been the victim of the robbery and a Jewish man came to the rescue. To have the Samaritan be the hero, to have him do what even Jewish religious leaders wouldn't do, and to have him come to the rescue of a Jewish man was horrific to that particular society. Jesus would have had to work awfully hard to come up with a more offensive story. Despite its "gag me with a spoon" quality, the story quite effectively made the point. Jesus asked, "So who is the neighbor?" The theologian answered "the one who showed mercy." Note that he refused to say "the Samaritan." He just couldn't bring himself to say such a terrible thing.

Jesus simply said, "You want to earn eternal life? Be a neighbor like that." He and everyone else knew the point was that if that's what it takes to earn eternal life we all might as well cash in our chips and go home right now, because it isn't going to happen. Love Samaritans and Romans, thieving, traitorous Roman lackey tax collectors and prostitutes the way we love ourselves? Treat the people we want to despise so powerfully it is visceral the same way we take care of ourselves? Who can do that? None of us can, meaning none of us can earn eternal life.

APPLICATION

This parable and its context speak to us on two levels. The first is the more obvious and the one most often preached. Jesus certainly intended us to learn this lesson, so we need to pay attention to it, though it was not his main thrust.

THERE'S NO ONE OUTSIDE THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Mr. Rogers used to open his show singing a song that ended with the words, "Let's make the most of this beautiful day. Since we're together we might as well say, would you be mine, could you be mine, won't you be my neighbor? Won't you please, won't you please, please, won't you be my neighbor?" He invited everyone to be his neighbor. He had no exceptions. All were invited to be a neighbor.

In part the message of this little story is that we are to be like Mr. Rogers and invite every human being without exception to be a part of our neighborhood. Jesus confronted the ancient Jews with the challenge that they must love the people they hated the most. That means that everyone, including that person who sets your teeth on edge, who creates a nearly uncontrollable desire in you to spew your lunch, yes, that person is your neighbor whom you are to love.

Because Carissa and Michael had a very small wedding they didn't have a rehearsal, but the night before the wedding Dale and Susan, Michael's parents, hosted a dinner at Peohe's in Coronado that was sort of like a rehearsal dinner. It was a beautiful and joyful evening. But at one point this random man wandered over to our table and asked if we were celebrating some occasion. We said yes, and pointing to the special couple said that they were getting married the next day. In response he began to loudly sing, "here comes the bride, big fat and wide." He apparently thought this was the height of comedy. Then he proceeded to make his way around the table talking to everyone as though they were long lost friends. Talk about obnoxious and annoying. All I could do was shake my head.

That guy isn't my neighbor, is he? Unfortunately Jesus' point is that even that nimrod is in my neighborhood. Last night one of my physical neighbors came to our door. He had a sick child at home and out of town guests, but he had encountered a homeless elderly woman at the grocery store. He wanted to help the poor woman, but was in a bind. He wanted to know if we could help. I told him I couldn't because I needed to review my sermon on the Good Samaritan. Just kidding. It was really inconvenient, the timing was really bad, but this woman was our neighbor, whom God had apparently dropped in our laps as a sermon illustration. So we put her up for the night in a motel and gave her some money to buy some food. Jesus says, "if it's human, it's your neighbor."

In John 13:34 Jesus said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." It wasn't really a new command, but a new clarification of an old command. The love we are to have is the love

Jesus has for us. So ask yourself this: which person or group of people did Jesus exclude? Who did he not love? Which people did he not die on the cross for?

This challenges first how we think about people. That difficult member of the family, that incorrigible boss or co-worker that makes you want to scream, that irritating neighbor, that supposed friend who did you some real harm that is painful to this day, you are to think of them as your neighbor whom God calls you to love.

But this also calls us to do more than fix our attitude. It would have been no good if the Samaritan simply had a good attitude toward the helpless victim. He needed to act. He needed to bind his wounds, take him to the inn and pay for his care. Jesus here calls us to move toward people and love them the way we love ourselves. We are to expend as much effort taking care of them as we do to take care of ourselves.

My guess is that right about now God is putting some person on your heart. Start with praying for that person. Ask God to give you his supernatural unconditional love. That doesn't necessarily mean that you will feel all sentimental and affectionate toward them. It means that you will act to pursue their good.

GOD LEAVES NO LOOPHOLES

That first application is an obvious lesson we can take from this incident, but it is one that can make us all feel like failures, leaving us with lots of guilt. We are so far from loving the way we ought to love, the way Jesus loves us. That, however, was not what Jesus was driving at.

The theologian believed that he had to earn his way into God's eternal kingdom. He also believed that he was doing that. But the only way he could believe that was by finding loopholes in God's commands. He could love his neighbor, as long as his neighbor was defined as people who were like him, agreed with him, and didn't drive him crazy. At least he could sort of look like he was loving them.

Jesus slammed that loophole shut with a vengeance. He said, "Excuse me, but the people you hate the most also are your neighbors. How are you doing loving them?" Do you think Jesus was just trying to one up the guy and make him look bad? Was he trying to embarrass him? No, he was making a point. The point was if you are going to try to earn your way into eternal life by keeping God's laws you need to understand that there are no loopholes, no excused absences and no grading on the curve. You have to fulfill the whole thing. We all know that we

have as much chance of doing that as we do of winning the lottery ten years in a row. It's just not going to happen.

I had a disturbing encounter recently. One morning I got a call from a person who claimed to have some connection to Microsoft. This person told me our computer was in serious trouble. It was so infected with viruses and malware and bacteria that it was going to cause the whole world to explode. This person said she would show me the problem and instructed me to type some commands into the computer, which I did. To my dismay without realizing it I had allowed this person remote access to our computer. I began to feel uneasy with the whole scene. By this time this woman was pushing hard for me to pay her company money to fix our problems and telling me if I didn't Armageddon was certain and immediate. I didn't know what to do. At that point I made the first good decision since I picked up the phone. I admitted to myself that I had a problem. I didn't know how to handle the situation and badly needed help. I put the woman off despite her urgent warnings of impending doom. She said she would call back. I called our Information Technology Service, otherwise known as our son, Toby. He said, "You didn't give her access to your computer did you?" I said, "Uh, well, uh, yes." He said, "Dad, Microsoft isn't going to call you and tell you that you have a problem with your computer." I said, "I thought that seemed a little odd." He said, "Turn it off right now and leave it off and don't do anything more with that woman." I did. He came by the next day and went through the computer and assured me that it was just fine. No viruses, no malware, no bacteria.

What does that have to do with the parable of the Good Samaritan? The key to dealing with that situation was admitting that I had neither the knowledge nor the ability to deal with it. When I admitted I had a problem and looked to an expert, Toby, we got things resolved. The first step in inheriting eternal life is admitting that you have a problem that is beyond you. The theologian didn't want to do that. He preferred to grab onto pretend loopholes, which meant he would never gain God's kingdom. What we need to learn from this story is that we have a problem. We don't love at the level that God commands and requires, and if we hope to earn our way into his kingdom by doing his will we are going to lose, and we're going to lose big.

Jesus did not come to make us feel guilty. He did not come to require us to meet standards that we have no hope of reaching. He came to rescue us from a hopeless situation. That rescue begins with admitting that we cannot save ourselves and it requires us trusting him to rescue us. This story was about that first step, admitting we need help. 1 John 1:8 says, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves

and the truth is not in us.” That was the theologian. The truth wasn’t in him and he was never going to gain eternal life. But John goes on in verse 9 and says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” It starts with admitting we have a problem, confessing that we don’t meet the standard. When we do that we will find forgiveness and love from God. So when you see your failure to love, let that turn you to him, to trust him and thank him that he has made a way for you to gain eternal life. Then out of gratitude for what he has already done for you, thank him and love him back by loving your neighbors as yourself.