

**Fifteenth Sunday *per annum***  
**Year C, 2025**

Dt 30:10-14    Col 1:15-20  
Ps 69         Lk 10:25-37

*Questions about law, neighbor, and eternal life*

Questions abound in the scriptures we read today. In the gospel, there is a first question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” And then a second question: “What is written in the law?” Two questions that give the same answer: love God with your whole being and your neighbor as yourself.

“Who is my neighbor?” A third question, likely asked in bad faith, but a good question nonetheless. A parable follows, and then yet another question is asked: “Which of these three ... was neighbor to the robbers’ victim?” The answer: the one who treated him with mercy. To be a neighbor, then, is to treat those in need with mercy.

To fail to treat another with mercy, then, is what, makes me what? What is the opposite of a neighbor? What is the opposite of treating those in need with mercy? Callous, indifferent, uncaring, unsympathetic, cold-hearted, cruel, ruthless, pitiless. Is that who and what I am?

We often interpret the story of the Good Samaritan by emphasizing the need to see the poor and downtrodden, the sick and lame, the ostracized and suffering, as our neighbors, as people who are worthy of our attentions and administrations. And this is a good lesson to learn, but it is not quite the point of the parable. Jesus did

not ask, “which of these three saw the victim as neighbor to himself?” but “which of these three was neighbor to the victim?”

The lesson to be learned is not about who others are to me, but who I am to others. Am I neighbor? If my understanding of neighbor is others in relation to me, then I will see them as people who have a claim on me, who can impose upon me, upon my time, my attention, my care, my human, emotional, moral, physical, and financial resources. I may then come to see them as a burden and to resent them.

But if my understanding of neighbor is myself in relation to others, then the demand to act with mercy and compassion does not arise from them, from outside, but from within, from me. It is not something imposed upon me by something outside myself. It becomes something I expect from myself. Being neighbor becomes something that I am toward others, no matter who they are or what their circumstances may happen to be.

The point of Jesus’s final question is to get us to see ourselves as neighbor, as dispensers of mercy, of lovingkindness, toward others. What we are meant to learn is that neighbor is not a quality in others, but a quality in ourselves.

Is Jesus, then, not neighbor par excellence? Without doubt. Is this not how Jesus deals with us, as supreme neighbor? Naturally. Did he not come to show us his mercy and love and grant us his salvation? Assuredly. Are we, who profess to be Christians,

followers of Jesus Christ, not meant to imitate him and to be like him? Absolutely. In this parable, Jesus is revealing himself as neighbor and teaching us that we must be like him, act like him, what St Paul would call having “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16), what Jesus himself called *metanoia*.

I am light to those in darkness. I am food to those who hunger. I am drink to those who thirst. I am balm to those who suffer. I am comfort to those who grieve. I am hope to those who despair. I am welcome to the unwanted. I am friend to the least. I am neighbor to all I meet. Meaning, when I see human suffering and need, I act to alleviate it. I act. I am neighbor.

Who can speak these words? Jesus, for sure. And all who follow Jesus as his disciples must be able to speak them as if they were their very own words. But words, friends, will not suffice. *Knowing* what the right thing to do is, is not enough. It is acting upon that knowledge that counts, which is why Jesus tells the scholar of the law: “Go and do likewise.”

It’s rarely the case that we don’t know what is the right thing to do. It’s often the case that we don’t have the will to do the right thing. And because we don’t want to or lack the will to, we pretend we don’t know or can’t know. And so we begin to ask sneaky questions, designed to exonerate ourselves from acting in a righteous manner, like “And who is my neighbor?” A question asked in bad faith.

In the gospel passage, Jesus asks, “*What* is written in the law?” Based on the first reading from Deuteronomy, we could ask a related question, a prior question: “*Where* is the law written?” The answer: in the book of the law, whose commands are neither mysterious nor remote, neither up in the sky nor across the sea, but very near to us, in our mouths and in our hearts. The real answer is that the law is already written in our hearts. Which is why we usually know what is the right thing to do. It’s only that we pretend we don’t, so that we don’t have to act, so that we can go on our way, side-stepping the voice of conscience within, and pass by on the opposite side, seeing but failing to act.

God had his commandments written in the book of the law so that we could see them before us and no longer pretend that this same law was not written in our hearts. Because of the hardness of our hearts, God wrote on hard stone the same commandments that he had already placed in our hearts, so that we could see that not even stone can resist the power of his commands and know what his commandments are and so have no pretext even for feigned ignorance. But again, merely *knowing* what the law is, is not enough. It is *acting* upon that knowledge that counts, which is why Moses tells the people that they must “*keep* [God’s] commandments and statutes,” that they “*have only to carry [them] out.*”

We need to stop pretending. We’re not even fooling ourselves, and God certainly is not fooled. When we see someone in need, we must act. When we see something wrong, we must take action. At the

very least, we need to say, “this is wrong,” “this is untrue,” “this is not right.” After all, in addition to the corporal works of mercy, there are the spiritual works of mercy, in particular instructing the ignorant and admonishing the sinner. Sometimes, people are not in material, but in spiritual need. Materially, they’re just fine. They’re not stripped and beaten down and left half-dead on the side of the road. Not materially. But spiritually, many around us, perhaps even some in this congregation, have fallen victim to robbers who have stolen from them their spiritual possessions: human feeling, moral decency, Christian charity, civic awareness.

I’ll tell you who’s robbing us. Pundits, podcasters, politicians, personalities. We’re meant to follow Jesus, not these petty polemicists and propagandists. To listen to them, applaud them, support them is to fall in amongst robbers. Either they will rob you morally and spiritually and leave you morally and spiritually half-dead, or else they will see in a you a kindred spirit and make you one of them, morally debased, spiritually degraded, preying on “others” – or to use the proper biblical terms for “others” – the poor, the orphan, the widow, the worker, the alien, the foreigner, the stranger.

You may want to test yourself. Who do you sound like, talk like, dress like, look like, act like? Jesus and the saints? Or one subset or another of the dim-and-dullest of the current media-political complex? To whose voice are you listening? Whom do you follow? Who are you imitating? Are you keeping company with robbers or

with Good Samaritans? Two thousand years ago St Paul issued a sobering warning along these lines: “Do not be led astray, for ‘Bad company corrupts good morals.’ Become [right-minded] as you ought and stop sinning. For some have no knowledge of God; I say this to your shame” (1 Cor 15:33-34).

Since we’re all about questions today, ask yourself: At the sight of human suffering and desperation, are you “moved by compassion” or by resentment, by pity or by prejudice? When I pass by, do I see or do I pretend not to see? When I pass by, do I leave more or less human suffering in my wake? What am I, then? Who am I? Am I neighbor or robber?

Now ask yourself: What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?