

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JULY 10, 2022

DEUTERONOMY 30:1-14 | PSALM 25:1-10 | COLOSSIANS 1:1-14 | LUKE 10:25-37

Sometimes the someone asks a question is almost as interesting as the answer they receive. Case in point is today's gospel reading in which a lawyer asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

What's interesting is not the focus on "eternal life." The scriptures are full of references to "eternal life." It's in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And it seems to be every other word in John's gospel. Asking Jesus about eternal life is fair game.

What's more interesting is that this man describes eternal life as something to be "inherited." That language of "inheritance" is used in the Hebrew Bible primarily to describe the gift of the promised land.¹ The people who would live there were not around when Abraham and Sarah made this covenant with God when this land was promised, but they were expecting to receive it. And they would enter into that reality not by virtue of their actions but just by virtue of being alive.

We know about inheritances from our own lives, too. An inheritance can be a good thing. Maybe you inherited some money from someone. Or you had a relative who left you a family heirloom. Or you might describe your appearance that way. You inherited someone's chin or someone's eyes. You may not have even asked for any of these things, but they were given to you just the same.

But an inheritance can also be a problem. Maybe instead of inheriting wealth, you inherited someone's debt. No one asks you, *Do you want this person's debt?* You just get it. And we inherit social problems, too. When you're born, no one asks you, *Do you want to live in a world with climate change or not?* We enter into the world that's been shaped by the actions of those who came before us. When we use language of original sin or universal sin, this is sort of what we're getting at. We always live in and are shaped by the world other people made.²

In any case, when we speak of what we've inherited, we're speaking of things that are outside of our control. They're just the way the world works. And that's part of what makes the parable Jesus tells so interesting. Jesus and the lawyer agree that the law teaches, "You shall love... your neighbor as yourself." Where this gets interesting is how they think about neighbors.

We usually think of our neighbors as something that we inherit. They are given to us. Maybe you choose the general kind of neighborhood you want to live in (city, suburb, rural), but you don't get to choose who lives next door. I did not choose to live next to people who set off fireworks at 11 AM. It's what I've inherited. This is just the world we live in.

Jesus says that if we're going to talk about neighbors, we should talk about Samaritans. There's a lot that we don't know about the origins of Samaritans.³ They seem to have had some of the same scriptural books, the Pentateuch in particular, but they didn't engage in the same worship practices. But what we do know is that they didn't get along with Jews like Jesus at all. You might remember a couple of weeks ago we heard a story of a Samaritan village that refuses to accept Jesus. Everywhere else Jesus goes he's mobbed with people, but Samaritans don't even want to talk to him. That's how deep the distrust is.

¹ Genesis 28:4, Deuteronomy 1:8; 2:12; 4:1

² Lutherans tend to talk about "universal sin" more than "original sin" since what matters is how humans are drawn away from loving God and their neighbors, not necessarily where that force originated from. See Günther Gassmann, *Fortress Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions* (Fortress Press, 1999), 162.

³ There's a good summary in "The Samaritans," accessed July 6, 2022, <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/people/related-articles/samaritans>.

And more important, this animosity was inherited. It was not as if every generation of Jews and Samaritans tried to make a go of it and then discovered that they didn't like each other. The mistrust was passed down from stories, stereotypes, grievances, and fears.

Some sociologists call these narratives "deep stories."⁴ Deep stories are stories that we are taught and tell others that make sense out of our world. They're not literally true, but they *feel* true. We don't teach them explicitly in picture books, but they undergird the ways that we interact with the world around us. So even if this Samaritan has never actually talked to a Jew before, he knows how he's supposed to handle himself. And he knows what kind of person this is.

So you can imagine how the kicker of the parable lands. "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The answer, we know, is the one who showed him mercy. That is to say, his neighbors are not just the people who share this man's religion, they are not just the people who live next door, they are not just the people this man likes to associate with.

To be a neighbor is not a way of talking about geographic proximity. To refer to someone as a neighbor isn't to say who they are in relationship with us. A neighbor is someone that we follow the move of God toward. Neighbor-ing is an action. It's to acknowledge that this is someone who is in relationship with God, and we're just catching up. Neighbor-ing is a way God empowers us to live in the world.

We live as faithful neighbors not by just loving the people who happen to live next door to us. But whenever we question whether the world we've inherited is actually the world God is drawing us toward. If you took a picture of our neighborhood and put it next to the kingdom of God, what differences would you see? And how would we close the gap between the two?

So whenever we encounter a situation that we've inherited, and we're tempted to move on because this is the way the world is, Jesus gives us permission to question whether there's actually another way. Jesus gives us another deep story. Instead of a story of animosity (Thank God we're not like those people.) or a story of mistrust (Those kinds of people don't belong around here.), Jesus gives us a story of compassion and mercy (Take care of him, and I will repay you whatever more you spend.). After all, what makes the Samaritan "good" is not that he is friendly or nice or kind. It's that his actions are not defined by the constraints and limits that he has inherited.

This focus on inheritance actually flips the parable around on its head. Because when many of us read this story, who do we identify with? Who are you supposed to be like? The Samaritan. But before you can be the good Samaritan, before you can start interrupting those stories, you need to put yourself in the position of the man in the ditch. We need to put ourselves in the position of having our inherited notions disrupted, our deep stories disproven. We need to be neighbor-ed.

And this is exactly what God does for us in Jesus. Jesus breaks through the cynicism and nihilism that fills our lives, the self-serving stories that we tell about ourselves and others. And whenever Jesus meets us in the ditches of our despair just he does around font, word, and table, he comes not to gloat or shame us but to bring us back on the way of life.

In Christ, we have been neighbor-ed. And so we go and do likewise.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

⁴ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, First Trade Paper edition (New York London: The New Press, 2018).