Sermon on Proper 15 Year C 2022

*You Don’t Have Neighbours!*

The stories of Jesus are the most transformative stories ever told. They’re not the most entertaining stories, for that we need the great novelists, the great epics and the like but the stories of Jesus, well they haunt me.

I used the word transformative because unlike other stories they invite you, they call you in fact to respond to God, and change your life in fundamental ways. They’re not meant to entertain you but shift the ground under your feet.

Take for instance the other day, there I was watching Jesus; I’m fascinated by the guy, but I stand on the outside of his circle. I’ve got a day job see and so if he’s in the area I try to get out to see him speak and interact with folks.

I think of myself as a person in the know, someone who knows a thing or two about the Bible, about theology, about the great gift of God’s Law. Indeed, I’m a lawyer, it’s my job to understand the law and how it impacts people.

I’m not sure why I did what I did, but something came over me that day; I’d never seen Jesus so excited, he was publicly praising God because some of his followers had been rather successful in going out to the surrounding villages sharing his message.

I’ve seen some of that lot and I’ll tell you this; I understand a lot more about the scriptures than they do; some of that lot didn’t even graduate from primary school; can they read and write, I doubt it!

And yet there is Jesus telling God how wise it is to have entrusted the message of Jesus calls the Kingdom, to these upstarts, these uneducated boors.

Well, something rose up in me and I thought, I’ve stood on the sidelines long enough; I’m going to find out if Jesus is the real thing or not, I’ll ask him the most important question of all and see if he’ll give the best answer, the truth or if he’ll mumble on about this and that.

I said something to the effect of “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

I guess he knew I was lawyer by what I was wearing because he deferred to me by asking “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

I have to say it kind of felt good to be deferred to by him; it felt like he was either respecting me or he didn’t know the answer himself and was going to rely on someone like me, an expert.

I gave him my best answer, the best and clearest summary of the law I could think of; I quoted the sum of the law in relation to God and to our neighbour as total and complete love, the kind of love we have for ourselves.

I thought I acquitted myself pretty well and, I have to say, I was pretty surprised but also thrilled when Jesus agreed with me!

I was starting to feel a little nervous because that “ticked off” feeling that I had at the beginning was waning; I was feeling respected by Jesus, engaged by him; I mean he had just given me his attention; he had humbly acknowledged the rightness of my answer.

This was like my own little “3 minutes of fame” moment; I guess you guys in the future might call it a viral video, whatever that is.

But there was something off-putting too about Jesus’ affirmation, something that felt like a subtle jab. He didn’t say “you’ve given the right answer, great summary of the law, he’d said, “you’ve given the right answer; *do* this and you will live.”

It was as if he was saying I wasn’t doing it and if I wasn’t doing it, well then, I guess all my knowledge wasn’t actually helping me inherit the one thing that is most important, life, eternal life!

I am an upstanding citizen, I’m a member of the synagogue council, I’m one of the readers of the scripture in our worship and I certainly give a fair amount of my legal fees to the synagogue and temple.

But somehow, none of that seemed important now and I have to tell you I was feeling pretty defensive, so I blurted out “And just who is my neighbour?”

I was thinking, okay, he’ll say something from the law, there will be a bit of clarification and all will be well; He’ll acknowledge that I *am* doing it, that I am inheriting the life God gives; I wanted that secure feeling of acceptance.

But then, well then, he told one of his blasted stories; I hear that this story has become one of his best known ones and to think that it was my outburst, my unease that was it’s occasion.

Well the story he told was outrageous, it didn’t make sense; well parts of it did and parts of it didn’t: a Jew lying wounded well that made sense, a lot of people think they’ll make a quick trip down to Jericho or up to Jerusalem and that if they do it during the daytime they’ll be safe; they don’t want to think about how dangerous it is.

Well, he got whacked and robbed and was pretty near death when a Priest and Levite walked by. I would have thought they would have helped him, the law is pretty clear that you should help someone who is dying, matters of ritual cleanliness do not apply in such circumstances.

But they didn’t! Turns out priests and scholars are just as big of cowards, just as liable to think “not my problem” as the rest of us; well that was a bit of a shock! I saw what he was doing, he was saying that people like me weren’t better just because we had more information, more education.

But then, it’s tough for me to even say the word, a Samaritan, one of the types all good Jews try to ignore, well he helped the injured Jew. I can’t imagine myself being helped by him. And the Samaritan helps him extravagantly; he goes over the top pretty near gives the guy his credit card!

Then Jesus asked me the question “which one of the three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man into the hands of robbers?”

First off, do you see what Jesus did there? He’s cut the legs out from under my question, “who is my neighbour?” Jesus is saying there is no class of people you can put a tick beside who you can say, “this one and this one, they’re neighbours but these ones over here aren’t neighbours.” *Basically there are no neighbours.*

He changes it completely he says; we’re not to concern ourselves with who is our neighbour but only to be concerned with “being a neighbour.” And to be a neighbour is to show mercy, God’s mercy.

To love your neighbour as yourself is to create a neighbour through love. Whoever is right in front of you should become your neighbour through your love and mercy!

I heard it, like a thunderclap, like the loudest siren waking me from my religious slumber.

Somehow, even though I was undone, I managed to answer correctly, “the one who showed him mercy,” (I still couldn’t say Samaritan!). Then Jesus says, again, “go and do likewise.” In other words show mercy to whom come into your life, whom you encounter and you will have life.

Now I sit on my bed, haunted by the sense that Jesus has redefined the good life. To participate in eternal life is to confront all my defensive justifications for my lifestyle, to confront all my avoidance tendencies and join in God’s mercy always, everyday.

To show mercy to all the people in my life, whether family members of whom we know all their faults, all the ways they tug at us, as well as all the people whom we simply meet through a car window as we’re driving down the road or in a store as they cut in line or as they ask us for spare change. Really?

But the amazing thing is that if eternal life is on offer, I can live this way, God would never invite us into something not possible, indeed it would be eminently possible, it would, in fact be clear and fit who God has made us to be.

Why I’m haunted is because I’m so damned defensive about my choices and my lifestyle; it narrows me, doesn’t allow me to see what I just saw. I guess we’re all like that. God have mercy! Yes, God will!