

If you hadn't noticed, there's a theme running throughout today's lessons. There's usually a theme running through the lessons. But today's is pretty obvious: "Love your neighbor."

We see it all over the place. Our Old Testament and Gospel lessons spell it out in those exact words, as does the Collect of the Day. And then all the lessons also discuss what that means. Feed the hungry. Do not steal. Be honest with those around you. Treat your employees well. Defend the defenseless. Speak well of your neighbor. Do not hate.

And then finally, capping it all off, we have the ultimate parable of loving your neighbor: The Good Samaritan. A story about a man who does all he can to help a complete stranger. Love your neighbor. This is definitely the theme of the day.

And I could easily stand up here and bludgeon you with that point. About all the ways we do not help the poor. All the ways we deceive one another for our own gain. About all the ways we do not defend the defenseless. About all the ways we slander and hate one another.

And I would be right. Because we are sinners. And we do many of those things. And you would hear it and be ashamed. And then you would go home and keep right on doing it. Because that's also what we do. As I think I've said before, we're not sinners because we sin. We sin because we're sinners. And beating you over the head with the Law won't change that.

Interestingly enough, though, that's not at all what Jesus does in our Gospel lesson. It seems like he does that, at first glance. It seems like he's just telling a story about a good Samaritan who behaves the way we should behave, but don't.

But that's really missing the point. Because we have to remember this is not just some hypothetical example that Jesus is using to make a point. This is a parable. And parables have a predictable structure and pattern to them.

And one of the key features of virtually all parables is that Jesus is a character in them. He'll be disguised in some other form, of course. He'll be the king ruling his subjects. Or the master over his servants. Or the bridegroom over his guests. Or the father over his sons. But he will be there. Somewhere in the parable.

And if we take the parable of the Good Samaritan and we turn it into just an ordinary tale about doing good works, in which we should be like the Samaritan, then where is God in all of this? This parable simply becomes a story about how we should try harder to be good people. Better people than we are. And God is irrelevant.

That's not a parable. That's not at all what Jesus is saying here. That's the opposite of the Gospel. That is, in fact, exactly the kind of story that the lawyer who started all of this wanted to hear.

We can't forget about what led to this parable. A lawyer, a teacher and expert in Jewish law, comes to Jesus and asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" God is irrelevant to this man. He doesn't want God to give him eternal life. He wants to take it. To earn it. He wants a story about how to try harder to be a good person. Do you really think Jesus is going to give him that? No.

OK, so that what this parable isn't. What is it, then? What is going on here? Well, to answer that we need to go back to the key feature of parables that I mentioned before. Jesus is usually in the story somewhere. So where is Jesus in this parable?

He's certainly not the robbers who beat the man up. Nor is he the priest or Levite who pass by the man. They're all bad guys in one way or another. And the innkeeper is a minor character.

So that leaves us two options. Jesus could be the man who was beaten. That could make sense, in a way. Jesus was beaten and crucified for us. But Jesus also wasn't rescued from that beating by anyone. This man survives because someone comes and helps him. Jesus didn't survive. No one came to his aid.

Which leaves the other option. That Jesus is the Samaritan. Which to his audience would have been a shocking thing to say. Samaritans were hated. They were considered unclean heretics to Jews. Jews didn't even like setting foot on their land. And Jesus is saying he is the Samaritan.

Let's retell this parable with that in mind. A man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. Who is this man? Doesn't matter. Could be anybody. Could be me. More importantly, it could be you.

So you are traveling. Traveling a very long, dangerous road. When you are attacked. Attacked by whom? Again, it doesn't matter. It's someone evil. Someone bent on hurting you and taking everything of value from you. Could be the world. Could be the devil. Could be your own sinful flesh. Whatever it is, it's evil.

You are attacked by the evil of this world and left for dead. Many people come by and see you. People who claim to be good. Teachers, religious leaders who talk a good talk. But do they help you?

No. When it comes right down to it, they're just as evil as the robbers who beat and stole from you in the first place. They are sinners too. And for whatever reason – selfishness or fear or disgust – they refuse to stop. They let you lay there dying.

Until another man comes by. He's a Samaritan. He's someone who should be your enemy. You have rejected him at every turn. You have insulted him at every opportunity. He is the only one of all three who has the right to ignore you. To pass by on the other side of the road and never feel a guilty conscience about it.

But instead, he has compassion on you. And instead of treating you like you treated him, he comes to your aid. He binds up your wounds. He carries you to safety. He gives you all he has to make sure that you live.

That Samaritan is Jesus. For while we were yet sinners, he died for us. The evil of this world, of the devil, of our own sinful flesh beats us up and takes everything of value away from us. Leaves us with nothing. And there is no one to turn to for help. Because they are just as selfish and fearful and disgusted with evil as we are.

But Jesus stops and has compassion on us. We treat Jesus as an enemy. And he treats us as a neighbor. As a friend. And gives us everything we need to live. He gives us eternal life.

It's a powerful parable. More powerful than we give it credit. And yet, there's still more to this parable. Because Jesus has some final words to the passage, a closing statement that adds even more meaning to this parable. He says to the lawyer as he departs: "You go, and do likewise."

You see, I lied. I told you before that we shouldn't take the parable of the Good Samaritan and turn it into just an ordinary tale about doing good works. But that's exactly what we should do.

Because Jesus is at the center of it. He is the Good Samaritan who has rescued us. He is the Lord. He is the love of God that endures forever. He is the mercy of God poured out on people who don't deserve it.

And he calls us to go and do likewise. To be his hands and feet in this evil world. To go to people who call us their enemies. People who have treated us with nothing but rejection and insults. People who hate us like Jews hated Samaritans.

He calls us to go to them when they are beaten up and robbed by the evil of this world. And treat them like our neighbors. Like our friends.

To bind up their wounds. Give them all that they need. And tell them that this is what the love of Jesus Christ looks like. This is the love of God that we ourselves have received.

The Good Samaritan is a parable about who we call our neighbors and how we treat them. But it's not bludgeoning us over the head with God's Law. It's not trying to make us feel guilty about our failures. And convince us to try harder to be better people.

No, the Good Samaritan is a parable of the Gospel. It is a parable about God's undeserved grace and mercy poured out on us in such abundance that it overflows to the lives of everyone around us. All those who we call our neighbors.

Even when they hate us. Especially when they hate us. Because those are often the ones who need God's love the most. Amen.